

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who loves you, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

“Third time’s the charm,” I tell myself as I try “one more time” to get the lawn mower to start in early April as I try to get a head start on my mowing.

“Third time’s the charm” is the comfort we offer to a 5-year-old when the child tries yet one more time to master that new two-wheeler after already weathering two crashes. “Third time’s the charm” is the mantra every batter recites when they’ve already got two strikes against them. The truth is, it seems sometimes good and bad things really do like to happen in threes. It really does take three times to get going, work out, sink in or to make an impact. Anyone working or living with children knows that messages, directions, orders, everything must be repeated multiple times before anything seems to register. Has anyone ever taken out the trash after being asked only once? How many of your children clean their rooms after one invitation? How many of you check off those things you have to get done today after only one entry in the “To Do” list you make up every day?

Instructions aren’t the only things we need to hear more than once in order to take them to heart. All of us who have ever loved or been loved know the words “I love you” can never be spoken too often. For some of us who have weathered the hurts of broken relationships, saying, “I love you,” for the first time again is one of the most frightening things we will ever do.

Saying “I love you” out loud is an important milestone in any relationship -- whether you’re whispering it to a new sweetheart, promising it to a new child, admitting it to an estranged parent, offering it to a lonely friend, or revealing it to a rival sibling. Saying “I love you” once is never enough. It’s just the beginning. We must say “I love you” over and over again -- we must hear “I love you” over and over again before we begin to trust the reality of those words and before we can feel the weight of the love that lies behind them.

In today’s gospel text, Jesus asks Peter three separate times, “Do you love me?” In part, we can understand this as John, the Gospel’s author’s way of canceling out each one of Peter’s shameful denials of Jesus on the night he was arrested and betrayed. I think Jesus’ persistence shows us more than a tit-for-tat scorekeeping of rights and wrongs. The risen Christ ties each of Peter’s confessions of love for him to a three times repeated command, to care for or feed my sheep.

What took Peter three times to get, and what takes all of us a lifetime to practice, is that Jesus’ question about “loving” and his command about “feeding” are one and the same thing. Peter didn’t immediately understand the implications of what it means to love Christ. Truly loving Christ *means* feeding the sheep. It means loving, protecting, caring for all those whom Christ loves. “Peter do you love me?” – “Then feed my lambs”; “Peter do you love me?” – “Then tend my

sheep”; “Peter do you love me?” – “Then feed my sheep.” Loving Christ and loving and tending Christ’s flock are one and the same thing.

Our love confessed, and our love expressed can take many different forms and not all of them are pleasant. I can tell you from personal experience, for every loving moment spent cuddling a new baby, there are an awful lot of equally loving, but not so lovely moments, spent changing smelly diapers. Loving a spouse is planning a romantic candlelight dinner for two -- and going to the theater when you would rather go to the baseball game (or vice versa). Having a loving friend is wonderful. You have someone to share conversation and good times over a cup of coffee or a Miller Lite, but it also means being there for him or her at 2 a.m. when you are needed or sharing those uncomfortable moments when we all need to be held accountable for our lives. Tending sheep and loving Christ is sometimes messy, inconvenient, upsetting and uncomfortable. It takes more than just good intentions to make the kind of loving commitment Jesus was trying to get Peter to admit to -- it takes habits and a certain lifestyle.

In theological circles, habitus is a hot new word for a very old idea. The concept behind “habitus” is that of “inhabiting” a pattern of living that is itself an outward expression of an inner philosophy of life. For us Christians that inner philosophy is one of love, faith, and forgiveness. As anyone who raises livestock for a living knows, caring for livestock is a daily, scheduled process. Dairy cows

with full udders don't much care whether it's Monday or Saturday or Sunday -- 4 a.m. is 4 a.m., and they need to be milked.

Establishing faith and love as a pattern of living takes commitment to the “three R's”: Repetition, Ritual and Reinforcement.

The first “R” is Repetition. Jesus repeated his question to Peter three times - not out of doubt or because of Peter's denseness, but in order to strengthen the power of his words. With each “Do you love me,” the meaning and inferences behind this question seeped more deeply into Peter's heart. In the last few decades, repetition as a way of learning has gotten bad press for being simply “rote memorization.” When I was trying to learn Biblical Greek, my professor used to say repetition is the key to success, up to ten times. I tell this to my grandkids as sound advice for their spelling, math and other classes...

There's another phrase we use to describe something we've committed to memory through repetition, we call it “learned by heart.” All those prayers, those actions, those responses to life that we “learn by heart” through constant repetition become a part of our heart. “I love you” – “Our Father who art in Heaven...” – “Praise God from whom all blessings flow...” – “God bless you.” All these phrases represent repeated expressions of love and faith in our lives -- and they are

no less powerful for having been repeated so often and so well that they are “learned by heart.”

The second “R” is Ritual. Rituals need not be mindless acts. Rituals rightly performed are very mindful acts. We all have our personal rituals. We get up, brush our teeth, take a shower, walk the dog, make the coffee, read the news or do some version of this routine. The consistency is comforting and settles our systems before we launch into another busy, hectic day. Have you established a similar habitus, a pattern of faithfulness, that serves the same purpose in your relationship to Christ? We need faith-rituals to give us stability when everything else around us seems to be shifting. All faith rituals need not be as formal as going to church or receiving communion. Although I will take this opportunity to say once again that weekly Holy Communion establishes the best ritual of all. Communion is the ritual of God telling each one of us “I LOVE YOU” and the ritual of each of us receiving His love. Other rituals are not as formal. A *habitus* ritual might be breathing a prayer of thanksgiving every time you enter into your home. It might be looking for our church steeple from the road as you pass by during the week and remembering all of God’s blessings. It might be seeing the farmers out in the fields and thanking God for the bounty of the earth that feeds us all.

The third “R” is Reinforcement. It’s so hard to stay on a diet when you hit one of those “weight plateaus” -- where no matter how good you are, how many salads you eat, your scales refuse to budge. We need periodic positive reinforcement to keep the habitus of our faith renewed and refreshed. This is why we need to hear “I love you,” as often as we need to say it. I don’t mean to keep harping on this, but once again this is one of the reasons I’m such a huge proponent of weekly Communion. It reinforces the truth that God still loves us no matter what happened this past week! Practiced faithfully, a *habitus* life will create its own reinforcement. Well-loved and well-tended sheep respond devotedly to their shepherd. Loving Christ, living a life faithfully tending to Christ’s business, regularly receiving His love and forgiveness becomes a super-natural reflex in a *habitus* life.

So, my dear congregation, Jesus is asking you this morning, “Do you love Him more than these? Then Feed His Sheep. Do you love Jesus more than these? Then care for His lambs. Do you love Jesus more than these? Feed His Sheep. Because “The third time’s the charm!” Amen.