

It's not enough to say "*I love you*" once. We must say it over and over and over again. Both the speaker and the hearer don't understand the implications of the words "*I love you*" until they are said and heard over and over again.

"*Third time's a charm*," we say to our passenger, smiling nervously as we try "*one more time*" to get the car to start on that snowy morning. "*Third time's the charm*" is the comfort we offer to a 5-year-old when the child timidly approaches the new two-wheeler after already surviving two crashes. "*Third time's a charm*" is what the Batter chants when they've already had two strikes against them.

The truth is, it seems that 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 and make an impact.**

Anyone working or living with children (which in some cases seems to include all those between the ages of birth and 85) knows that messages, directions, orders, everything has to be repeated multiple times before anything seems to register. **Has anyone ever taken out the garbage after being asked only once?** How many of your children clean their rooms after one invitation? *How many of you write thank-you notes after only one entry in the "Things to Do" list you make up every day?*

But 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 that the words "*I love you*" **can never be spoken too often. For those of us who have weathered the hurts of broken relationships, saying, "I love you," for the first time again in a NEW RELATIONSHIP...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 are

- whispering it to a new sweetheart, - promising it to a new child, - admitting it to an estranged parent,
- offering it to a lonely friend, - revealing it to a rival sibling.

Saying "I love you" once is never enough. IT IS 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 the Johannine author's way of canceling out each one of Peter's shameful denials of Jesus on the night he was arrested and betrayed. **But Jesus' persistence demonstrates 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 thrice-repeated command "Care for 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 DIRECTIVE. Peter didn't understand immediately 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!

Three little boys were debating whose mom was the most loving. **The first little boy said:** "My mommy loves me because I gave her a quarter, but she gave it back, saying 'Go and buy a piece of candy.'" **The second little boy argued** that his mother loved him more because "If I give her a quarter, she gives me back two quarters for

two pieces of candy." **The third little boy**, seeing the direction of the debate, scratched his head and said, *"Well, my mom loves me more because she would keep the quarter and then tell me how much that quarter will help her pay the bills."*

The love confessed and the love expressed can take many different forms and not all of them are pleasant. 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 ballet when you would rather go to the basketball game (or vice versa). A loving friend gives you a comfortable place for coffee and conversation, but it also means being there for him or her at 2 a.m. when you are needed.

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.**

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 expression of an inner philosophy of life (in the Christian case, love and faith). 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 is Monday or Saturday or Sunday... **4 a.m. is 4 a.m., and they need to be milked.** This reality is what keeps part of the state of Indiana stubbornly on standard time all year round. Livestock only recognize their "biological clocks," not our playing around with the clock on the wall so we can fool ourselves about the amount of daylight we're getting.

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

In our reading we learn about 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 SUGGESTIONS behind this query 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."*

But there is another phrase child will use to describe something they have committed to memory through repetition, we *"learn 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 ..." "Praise God" "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."

ALSO, there are "RITUALS" that bring us CLOSER TO JESUS: Rituals need not be mindless acts. Instead, **"RITUALS" rightly performed are mindful acts.** We all have our personal rising rituals: we get up, brush our teeth, take a shower, walk the dog, make the coffee, read the paper 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. A "HABITUS RITUAL" might be breathing a prayer of thanksgiving every time you enter into your home. It might be looking for your church's steeple from the freeway on your morning commute. It might be (you fill in something specific from your own context here). Yes, it adds, stability to your day.

And we all need “REINFORCEMENT” in our lives—a SOURCE that can make us STRONGER, CAN BRING US CLOSER TO GOD—Jesus is just that Source. It is 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.

Due to the challenges of life--**We need periodic positive reinforcements to keep the “HABITS OF OUR FAITH,” those tools that will renew and refresh US.** Habits like prayer, devotions, reading God’s Word, worshipping with other believers, serving God in various ways and yes, caring for God’s Sheep.

Also, this is why we need to hear those precious words, *"I love you," as often as we need to say it.* When practiced faithfully, a life surrounded by *“faith-habits”* will end up being a life Well-loved and Well-tended with healthy sheep surrounding it and definitely **a devotedly life lived WITH & FOR the SHEPHERD!!**

REMEMBER...Use your “Faith Rituals,” your “3-R’s” so that you will have the Strength, the Drive, the Purpose to want to FOLLOW Jesus throughout your Life and know him well when you reach then END.
Amen.