

Do You Love Me?

John 21: 1-4, 15-17 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ² Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, Feed my sheep.

Do You Love Me?

This morning, let's look at another story of Jesus interacting with the disciples after his resurrection. Peter and six other disciples left Jerusalem and went back home to Galilee. Peter decided to go fishing and the others went with him. We picture the disciples as full time preachers, as missionaries, as constantly teaching, church planting, and bringing people to know Christ. But they got off to a hesitant start. We look at Easter morning and the appearance of the risen Jesus from our vantage point. These poor folks were in the midst of living the experience. I suspect that they were stunned. This was something that they had never experienced before. It was unimaginable. They had no frame of reference for this. Sure, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, but the disciples could go to Bethany and visit with Lazarus anytime they wanted to be reassured that he was alive and that they hadn't dreamed the whole thing. But Jesus shows up and then goes away, shows up and goes away. It's disconcerting and a bit unnerving, probably.

Nonetheless, at first glance it seems rather quirky that Peter and the guys decide to go fishing. Is it a matter of needing to make some money? Are they broke? Did they return to their old life because they figured that the whole Jesus thing had ended in failure? Their leader, their instructor, their mentor, had been brutally killed, and now, every once in a while, they would see him and talk with him. How were they supposed to deal with that?

When your world changes radically and suddenly, it usually leaves you disoriented. When you lose your job unexpectedly, you don't know what to do. When your spouse, your parent, or your child dies suddenly, you're left in shock. You're dazed, you're devastated, you go back and forth between gut wrenching grief and disbelief. You expect to still hear their voice or find them at the breakfast table.

Often, in times like that, people gravitate almost mindlessly to familiar activities. We lose ourselves in television or in the garden, reach for chocolate, go shopping, or work long hours to fill the time and distract the mind. It's the way that we try to cope with emotional overload. These seven disciples went fishing. It's what they knew. The disciples over the past few weeks had gone from a joyful parade into Jerusalem, to an unusual Passover meal, an armed arrest in a garden in the middle of the night, a mock trial, a terrorizing execution, an empty tomb, and the coming and going of their resurrected rabbi. Their emotions had been whipsawed from extreme to extreme. So they clutched at the familiar; they went fishing.

And then, Jesus showed up again, but the disciples didn't recognize him standing there on the beach. In the midst of their ordinary task of fishing, in the midst of their safe emotional haven in the ordinary and familiar act of fishing, in the midst of daily life, Jesus showed up. And they didn't know that it was him. Do you get the feeling that nothing has changed over the centuries? In the form of the

Holy Spirit, Jesus keeps showing up. The Spirit is present when we want to hide from the turmoil of life. The Spirit is present when we're immersed in everyday ordinariness. And because we are wrapped up in turmoil or the busy pace of life, we can easily fail to recognize Jesus standing on the shore nearby; we can fail to hear the gentle whisper of the Spirit.

Eventually, the disciples came ashore and had breakfast with Jesus on the beach. We'll come back to that part of the story in a few weeks. In their intermittent encounters with Jesus, we can certainly imagine that there was a certain amount of tension in the air. That night in the garden when the mob came to arrest Jesus, the disciples ran away. They deserted him. Can you picture how both joy and shame had to be overwhelming each time they saw Christ after Easter morning? They had failed to be faithful friends. Peter had snuck into the courtyard near the mock trial of Jesus, only to publicly and vehemently deny three times that he even knew Jesus. How could any of the disciples conceive that they had any right, any authority, any credibility to speak of his message among themselves, much less to others?

On the night when Jesus was arrested, as he was having supper with the disciples, Jesus said, "Where I am going, you cannot follow." Peter spouted back, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." (John 13:37 NRS) Instead, just a few hours after making that declaration, Peter denied ever knowing Jesus. Here on the beach after breakfast, it appears that there was unfinished business to clear up as Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" It's a pretty pointed question. Do you, who denied me, love me more than these others who deserted me? English doesn't do this conversation justice. I've talked with the children about how we use the word love to mean many things. I love springtime, enchiladas, my dog Ginger, my family, this congregation, several kinds of music, good books, Cathy, and my God – everyone in a different way. Greek offers more exact words for love. *Eros* referred to erotic love, sexual and passionate. *Philos* referred to the love of friendship. *Agape* was a higher level of love involving high esteem, special devotion, and cherishing.

Peter, do you agape me? Do you love me with special devotion? Lord, I *philos* – I love you as a friend. Maybe Peter was wary and didn't want to claim too much about his love. Jesus asked the same question again and received the same answer. Then Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me as a friend? Now the text says Peter was hurt. Perhaps he was hurt because Jesus asked him a third time. But perhaps he was also hurt because on the third time, Jesus asked less of him. It wasn't "Do you agape me? Do you cherish me? No, the third question was, "Do you love me as a friend?" Did Peter hear it as if Jesus was giving up on Peter a little bit? Did it sound like, "Are you sure you love me even that much?" We can only speculate. But one thing is clear. After each time that Peter answered the question, Jesus told him to teach and guide the flock of believers.

Peter needed to hear a word of forgiveness and restoration. So did the rest of the disciples. Actually, we all need that. We could all use a fresh start, a "do-over," another chance to do better. Peter had betrayed Jesus despite his bravado and big claims. Now, he was in no position to ask to be forgiven – and he didn't. But he was forgiven anyway. We think that to be forgiven we have to ask for it. This story, like the prodigal son, and other examples in scripture, says no, we receive grace, unwarranted, unasked-for, forgiveness. God's grace can't be held back!

Christ was willing to seek out and engage someone who had publicly deserted him. What's more, he's willing to entrust Peter with ministry, with teaching and leading - despite Peter's track record of impetuosity followed by denial.

The word *gospel* means "good news." Here is some great news. Even if we have deserted Jesus, even if we have shunned him, even if we have vehemently declared that we don't know him and don't want to know him, Jesus is still standing on the shore, ready to welcome us. Even if we have been lazy, reluctant, and unreliable disciples, Jesus still loves us and can make use of us. Jesus loves us. The question is, do we love Jesus? Do we love Jesus enough to do more than show up once in a while to see friends and sing a few favorite old songs? We're talking about more than moving the mouse and

clicking on “like this” on Facebook. Do we love Jesus enough to be faithful when that requires some of our time, some of our resources? Do we love Jesus enough to risk disapproval of others? Do we love Jesus enough to feed his sheep and tend his flock? Oddly enough, no matter what, Jesus showers us with mercy and grace. No matter what our track record, there is some way that we can feed and tend the flock. The question is, “Do we love him?” Our response to that question is in, not what we say, but in what we do. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

As the Father sent Christ, so it is that Christ sends us out.
In whatever way you are hiding, open the door and step out.
Live as Easter Christians, empowered by the resurrection!