

April 23, 2017

Children, Have You No Fish

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 21:1-6, 9-10, 12, 15-17

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One of the greatest Broadway musicals of all time is *Fiddler on the Roof*. How many have seen it? (Back and forth comments with congregants – wonderful songs – Sunrise/Sunset, If I Were a Rich Man; great phrases – “as the good book says,” “tradition!”) Well, there’s this great scene where Tevye asks his wife, Golde, if she loves him. So let's watch the video...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_y9F5St4j0

I think I speak for most of us when I say that scene was not only very heartwarming, but, even a little bit of a tearjerker. Because it's true, don't you think, that so often it's hard for us to express and show our love... consistently. One reason is that life just seems to get in the way. We get so busy and focused on what's happening in front of us at the moment, like work, social commitments, our routines, even television, that we sometimes take for granted the people who are such a part of us. I'm sure we've all been on both sides of that question – the one being asked, and the one asking, “Do you love me?” The famous American songwriter Oscar Hammerstein wrote, “A bell is not a bell, till it’s rung. A song is not a song, till it's sung. Love in your heart isn’t put there to stay. Love isn’t love till you give it away.” So we can probably all agree that it's a good idea to recommit ourselves to the importance of expressing and showing our love to one another - to our families and friends, by both our words and our actions.

But let's take this idea a step further, and consider how does the question, “Do you love me?”, apply to our lives as Christians? In today's Scripture, we hear Jesus asking his disciple Peter the question, “Do you love me?” “Do you love me?” Effectively expressing the same frustration that Tevye was feeling. But before you think about how you might respond to that question, consider first, that God is the source, the author, of love. And, as such, shouldn't our love reflect God's love, radiating outward, embracing, affirming all God's children, each and every one of us. Remember, Jesus calls us, to go and “bear fruit,” to go and “wash one another's feet,” to go and “let your light shine,” to go and “love one another.” Even, go, and have a rummage sale. And so now, how do you think might be the best way to respond to Jesus asking you, “Do you love me?” Whenever I read this passage, I always think of a comment Pastor Rick Warren once made. I'm paraphrasing, but he said, "Do you ever wonder why God just doesn't zap his followers, his believers, right up to heaven, like right now, right this minute?" That's

a good question, don't you think. "Well, perhaps, it's because, he's leaving us here on earth for a specific purpose... to help others believe and follow him." Perhaps we respond to Jesus' question by bearing fruit, washing another's feet, letting your light shine, loving one another.

Let's look for a moment at what transpired there on the shores of Lake Galilee. Peter and the disciples had been fishing. And on that particular night their efforts went for naught. All night long they did what they always do, casting their nets the way they always had. But this time, they catch nothing. And there stands Jesus, watching them from a distance. He looks at their empty nets, and says to them, "Friends, you have no fish, have you?" I can imagine what they must have been thinking, downcast, depressed, as they answer, "No, we don't have any fish." But then, something miraculous happens. Jesus tells them to change what they are doing, to fish differently. He tells them to cast their nets on the other side. Which they do. And then, they caught so many fish, they weren't able to haul them all in.

Now I believe this scripture is an object lesson for the church as a whole, and for us as disciples of Christ. You see, Jesus began his ministry by telling those fishermen, Peter, Andrew, James, John, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." Just like Rick Warren was saying, Jesus' intention was to bring people into the Kingdom of God. To bring them into that place of faith, hope, love, and fellowship with one another. And he needed his followers, his disciples to help him. Just like he does today. So he calls those of us who do know him, to go out and fish for those who don't know him. So here we are today, the modern church, full of disciples, yes?, in the service of Jesus Christ, ready and willing to accept his commission to become fishers of people. And there seems no lack of energy or effort on our part, is there? I mean we preach, and teach, and study, and serve. We contribute, we volunteer, we put an incredible amount of effort into our work, our meetings, our music, and more. I can go on, and on. Yes, we labor day and night fishing for people. There's a great amount of noise, tremendous splashing in the water, but, where's the big haul of fish? Why is it that church attendance nationwide is steadily decreasing? Why is it that fewer and fewer people make God a priority in their lives? Why is it that the majority of young people today don't even know the Lord's prayer? Doesn't it make you wonder, what's missing? What could be the missing element? Well, could it maybe be... love? Yes, love?

Because that's exactly why Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" You see, earlier in his ministry, Jesus specifically told Peter, "You are Peter, and upon this rock, upon you, I will build my church." And

now, the time has come for Jesus to imprint on Peter's mind just what the foundation of that church should be, what the message of the church should be. First, he says, "Do you love me?" Do you, Peter, the church, have a heart for me and for the work I'm calling you to do? And second, if you do... then "feed my sheep." Again and again Jesus pointedly asks Peter the question, "Do you love me? Then feed my sheep, tend my lambs, care for my people." What Jesus is saying here is that if we really love him then our response will be to love other people. Not love given as a platitude, a convenient offering of our time or our money so that we can say to ourselves, "see what I did." No, Jesus is talking about showing and expressing real, sincere love for one another, everyday, in all situations. Giving out of a love that is selfless and sacrificial. And yes, that's a hard thing to do. Especially, remember, when life gets in the way. And look at our results – "Friends, you have no fish, have you?"

Jesus told us, "Love others as you love yourself." I know you've all heard this passage before, but one of the most beautiful descriptions of love the way Jesus would want us to love comes from St. Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. Listen a moment, as you think about how you express and show your love to others. "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or proud. Love is not ill mannered, or selfish, or irritable. Love does not keep a record of wrongs. Love does not rejoice with evil, but rejoices with the truth. Love never gives up. It never loses faith, is always hopeful and endures through every circumstance." And just imagine if we loved others this way. Imagine seeing that person of color with no hope, that young person who's lost, that old person who's vulnerable. And rather than ignoring them, instead thinking, I want that person to have hope, to have opportunity, to have security, and so I'll give or volunteer, to make a difference. Imagine the irritable, unfriendly person on the other side of the register or the other end of the phone, and instead thinking, "That poor person is having a bad day. Maybe she just learned bad news about a loved one's health, maybe her child is struggling with drugs. I'll respond with extra patience and kindness, and I'll say a prayer for her." Imagine the person serving you or cleaning your room or landscaping your yard, and thinking, "This person has to work hard. I want that person to be happy in their work – to feel that what he/she is doing has value and is important," and then offering a smile, a compliment, a bottle of water, a tip, a "thank you." Imagine seeing all the people around you as children of God, with feelings, problems, hopes and dreams – the same as you.

Remember that searing comment by Mahatma Gandhi. When asked about his view of Christianity, he said, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Something is obviously, drastically wrong. And so it just might be that we need to change the way we fish. That is, to change the way we love. Maybe Jesus is calling us to cast our nets on the other side. To change our old ways of doing things. To think differently, to act differently as Christians out in the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that, "In Jesus, the message and the messenger, are one." And that's our calling as well... to tell the message, and, most importantly, to be the message. To "Cast out nets of love." And then, I truly believe, there will be so many people, you won't be able to haul them all in. "Do you love me?" "Do you love me?" Think about how we can show Jesus Christ that we do! Because I can't imagine anything worse than hearing Jesus say to me one day, "You have no fish, have you?" Amen.