

July 30, 2017

“Do You Love Me More Than These?”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 21: 1-6, 9-11, 15-17

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I always find this final chapter of St. John's Gospel so compelling. In just a few verses, it sums up so well what our connection, our relationship, with our Lord Jesus Christ should be like. Because Jesus' questions gets right to the heart of the matter. As you know, this summer we're looking at and exploring different questions Jesus and God asked of people. Questions they specifically asked that are intended to help us grow and become better people, better Christian disciples. Because think about it. So often as we go through life we seem to be the ones always asking God the questions. You know, "Why is this happening to me, God?" "Where are you, God?" "What is the meaning and purpose of my life?" "What am I supposed to do?" Yes, we like to be the ones asking the questions. And yet, when someone asked Jesus a question, many times he answered them with a question. Why? Because he wanted to change people – to challenge their way of thinking, to help them grow, to encourage them to think and live like he did. And doesn't a question have greater power to transform us than an answer. Because when we are encouraged to use our minds, to think, to reason, and to reflect, we tend to look more deeply into our hearts, to look more honestly at ourselves. And a change in us is more likely to occur, because it comes from the inside out.

So let's look at the scripture. It's after Jesus has been resurrected, but before he ascends into heaven. The disciples have been fishing all night but their efforts have proven fruitless. Suddenly Jesus appears on the shore, but at first, they don't know it's him. Maybe it was a foggy morning and they couldn't see clearly from the boat. But interestingly, he asks them a question. A rhetorical question that sets the stage for the ultimate question he will ask them, and us, which I'll get to in just a moment. He asks, "Children, you have no fish, do you?" No they do not. I can imagine what they're thinking. They're discouraged and depressed after a whole night of fishing and coming up with nothing. But then they listen to what Jesus tells them to do - put their nets on the other side, and they make the connection - they recognize Jesus. They listen, and they do what he says. And Jesus provides all that they need. In this case, fish in abundance.

But you see, it wasn't until they made the connection with Jesus that he could work in their lives. They had tried on their own terms and failed. "You have no fish do you?" And that is a lesson we need to be mindful of as well... keeping connected with Jesus is really the only way that Jesus can ever work in our lives and provide for us as well. It's the only way we will know and understand the wisdom of his

teachings that can guide us through this complicated life. Things like, "Abide in me, and I'll abide in you and you will bear much fruit." "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world." "Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Yes, these promises and blessings, and more, are ours when we too, recognize our need to stay connected and in relationship with Jesus Christ, the living God.

Now some people find it difficult to believe that God, through Jesus Christ, really wants to be in relationship with us... simple human beings who are mistake prone, confused, wounded, tarnished. But the thing is, God knows all these things about us – the good, the bad, and the ugly. And yet, God loves us unconditionally, just as we are. God loves us so much that he calls us his children – his beloved sons, his beloved daughters. And, in return, and this is what we sometimes don't think about – God wants to be loved by us. God wants to be loved by us. You can relate to that, can't you – when you love someone, you want them to love you back. You want to be in a mutual loving relationship. It's the same with God. In fact, we hear Jesus coming right out, bearing his soul so to speak, and asking Simon Peter... and asking each one of us here today... that ultimate question I was referring to, "Do you love me? Do you love me more than these? Do you love me?" It's a question that gets right to the heart of our Christian faith and commitment. Do we love God, really love God? It's a great question, isn't it?

Let's go back to scripture. Peter comes in from fishing, pulling in his net full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three to be exact. That was an incredible haul. One, I'm sure, worth a lot of money. In today's terms, it's probably comparable to the stories you've heard about a local Cape Cod fisherman catching a large tuna worth tens of thousands of dollars, and the Japanese come in to immediately purchase it. That's a nice payday. Those thousands of dollars can buy so many material things – fancy vacations, new clothes, fine dining, better golf clubs, a bigger handbag, an upgraded smartphone, and more. Just think of it all. And there's Peter, with a hundred and fifty three large fish, who would probably also enjoy his new found wealth. And then we hear Jesus ask Peter the question, "Do you love me more than these?"

Now people throughout the ages have often wondered the significance of the number, 153. Why 153? There's all sorts of speculation, but, I've mentioned this before, the best explanation I've heard was on my trip to the Holy Land. At the time of Jesus, Rome ruled the world. Besides being great conquerors, the Romans were also great scientists and engineers as evidence by their roads, buildings and aqueducts that still stand today. And according to this explanation, Rome had cataloged one hundred fifty-three

species of fish – and so this catch represented all the different fish known in the entire world at the time. So when Jesus asks Peter the question, do you love me more than these, he is in fact asking, do you love me more than the world, more than all that is in the world? More than all the material possessions and conveniences, more than all the enticements of the culture – wealth, social status, power, rank. Do you love Jesus Christ more than these? Well, do you?

Obviously, this question encourages us to think, reason and reflect on our love for Christ as compared to our love for “things.” Is your love more, on the surface – reflected by attending church an hour or so, but through little else? Or do you have a love that is deeper, richer, stronger, and actually makes a difference in your life. Is it a love that actually guides your thoughts and actions. Now some of you may say, “No, I don’t have that kind of love. I’m not there in my faith journey.” That’s okay, you’re being honest. So for you, this question is an invitation to get to know Jesus better, to deepen your connection, your relationship with him. It’s an opportunity for you to say, “You know what, I’m not going to live life on my own terms anymore. I want the love, hope and power of having Jesus work in my life and provide all that I need. Jesus once said, “Those who hear my words and act on them will be like man who built his house on rock and when the storms came and blew against it, it did not fall.” And we know what happened to the house built on sand, don't we! So today, I encourage you to start spending more time getting to know Jesus. Because Jesus also promised, “Seek, and you will find.”

Others of you here have that deep love – you’re like Peter, who said, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Then listen to what Jesus says to Peter: “Feed my sheep.” You see, Jesus expects Peter, and us, to show our love for him by showing our love for others – by caring for and loving and helping those whom Jesus loves, which is everyone. During Jesus’ ministry, the Bible tells us, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Later, he said, “I am the shepherd.” And so, Jesus is saying that if in fact we do love him, then we must express that love through action by “feeding his sheep” – caring for and loving his flock. By showing compassion to those less fortunate than yourself, by being generous with what you have, by doing what is right and just, by showing mercy and love to those who have hurt you, by telling others about Christ. And this requires sacrifice – of self, of time, of money, of sometimes giving up something you want to do for something you know you should do. And so feeding the sheep is not always an easy place to get to. Unless you love God, love Jesus, more than these.

Let me end with a revealing story about a time back in the day when the bridges over the Cape Cod canal were first built and tourists started coming to Cape Cod. More and more people had cars and could easily and quickly travel to the Cape for vacation. One day, a big fancy car with New York license plates pulled up to a beautiful old sea captain's house here in Falmouth and the driver asked the old salt, a native, sitting there on his porch, for directions. "Could you tell me how to get to Chatham," the New Yorker asked. The old salt thought for a while... and finally said, "Nope, sorry, can't help ya there." "Aren't you a Cape Codder?" asked the New Yorker, sarcasm dripping from his mouth. "Sure am," came the reply. "You mean to say you've lived here your whole life, and you don't know the way to Chatham." Again the old man thought for a while, and finally answered... "You know, I've been around the whole world at least a dozen times in my life, and my business has brought me to hundreds of ports in dozens of different countries, and I've loved them all. But I never had any business or any reason to go to Chatham."

You see that describes so many of us. We are so worldly. We love all the things this world give us. And yet we've never been to Chatham. And likewise, we've never been to that place of truly feeding Jesus' sheep because our business has taken us elsewhere. So listen again to this week's question, "Do you love me?" "Do you love me more than these?" (Pause) If you do, then feed my sheep.