

Do You Love Me?

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren

Sermon for Sunday, May 30, 2010, John 21:9-17

It had been an incredible three years, an emotional roller coaster, a series of adventures and experiences and lessons that Peter was only just beginning to understand. He needed some time to reflect, but Peter was one of those people who cannot bear idleness, who think most clearly while their hands are occupied somehow. And so, in those first days after the resurrection – days in which the disciples felt all day long as we feel when we are first waking from a dream – Peter decided to busy himself with the physical activity he knew best.

He declared to the others, “I’m going fishing.” It was an odd thing to say, really quite out of the blue. A number of them had been fishermen once, fishing every day the weather was fit for it, but that was years ago. Indeed, it seemed like another lifetime. Yet, after sitting around, most of the time quietly running through the events of the past several days in their minds, sometimes talking to each other, and not really thinking about anything else for days, Peter was the first to blink, so to speak. “I’m going fishing,” he said.

The others looked at him at first as if he had spoken English instead of Aramaic. But then they looked at each other, and communicated without speaking. As they were all in agreement, one of them said to Peter, “We’ll go with you.” So when Peter got up, the rest of them did the same. They got their things together and went to the big lake, Lake Tiberius, also known as the Sea of Galilee.

When they got there, somebody rented them a boat and some nets. It was getting dark, which is a good time to fish, so they put out into the open water. The lake was almost still, and the sun was going down behind the western hills, where there were some low, wispy clouds turning all shades of orange and red and even purple. Because it was so still, the voices and other sounds from shore carried a long, long way across the water, so the disciples kept going further and further until the loudest sounds were the creaking of the boat and the occasional splash of a fish jumping nearby.

They all just sat for a while, even those who had been fishermen and knew what to do next. They sat, taking it all in, re-acclimating themselves to the sights and the sounds and the smell of fresh water, wet wood and old nets. Then, again, Peter took the initiative. He grabbed one end of a net and said, “Andrew, get us in closer to the shore and let’s take a run at them.”

They fished all night, with no luck at all. They didn’t catch a single fish, which in former times would have really upset Peter and the other fishermen. But catching fish was hardly the point that night. It was irrelevant. It was the physical exertion and the chance to take a deep breath of fresh air that mattered. Fishing was just an excuse to get away, and something to do, while they kept trying to make sense of it all.

When, after many hours, the sun that had sunk in the west appeared again in the east, lighting the western shore with a golden light, they stopped fishing altogether, and just drifted. The people in the villages along the lake were stirring, and the noises they’d heard the night before as they set out – voices and thumps and rumbles and squeaks – came out across the water, louder, then softer, then louder again as the boat kept moving.

And then one voice called out to them, and drew their attention to a figure standing on a lonely stretch of the shore. The distance was too great to make out who it was, but there was no mistaking whom the man was speaking to. “Children,” he said, “you haven’t caught any fish,

have you?”

“How could he know that?” some of them wondered. But Peter thought, “Whoever it is must have done some fishing himself. He can tell, even at this distance, that we haven’t caught anything, just by the way the boat sits in the water.” One of the others shouted back, “No, sir, we haven’t.”

The man on the shore shouted back. “Cast on the right side, right where you are, and you will find some.”

The others looked at Peter, and he nodded. Why not? The man knew something about fishing, after all, and what could it hurt? So they fed out the net at an even pace, waited, and then began to draw it back in. They knew immediately that they had a catch. The net felt heavy, and grew heavier as they tugged it along. They struggled together and drew it up alongside the boat, where they could look down through the water and see the shiny, squirming shapes pressed against each other. They were able to hold it close, but they knew it would be impossible to bring the catch aboard without capsizing the boat.

Suddenly, the man on the shore came more clearly into view. One of the disciples said to the others, “Look, it is the Lord.” But they all knew it, even before a word was said. They had all recognized him at the same moment. The others began to make for shore with the catch, but Peter, as impetuous as ever, threw on his cloak and dove into the water. He swam a short distance, until he could reach the bottom, and then he walked the rest of the way, up out of the lake on to the shore.

The Lord sat near a charcoal fire, and the aroma of roasting fish and fresh bread filled the air. Peter took a seat near him, too filled with joy to speak. Jesus called out to the others, who had come as far as possible and anchored the boat, “Bring some of your fish.”

Peter jumped up and grabbed a stick lying nearby, one about as big around as his thumb and a little longer than his arm. He sprinted to the boat with it, his feet pounding the sand and splashing water. He had others help him take some of the fish out of the net and he slid the stick through their gills so he could carry them. He brought them to shore, and the other disciples came along.

With Jesus, they prepared a meal, which Jesus served. They sat around laughing and smiling and making small talk, as people will do when something too wonderful for words has happened, as if to mention it would break the spell. They all just wanted this moment to last as long as it could, and to be in the moment, not to take a step away from it by talking about it.

Peter sat there, across from Jesus, the pit of glowing coals between them. He took a bite, then looked at Jesus and gave a smile, which Jesus returned. Seeing Jesus’ smile, a lump formed in Peter’s throat and he could barely swallow. He could not help thinking about what a gift that smile was, and how little he deserved it, and how certain he’d been that he would never see it again. It was a simple smile, that’s all, but it was the single most precious gift Peter could imagine receiving – a smile that said, “I’m so glad to be here with you, so glad to have a friend like you.”

Peter had not noticed the others moving away from the fire, until Jesus spoke to him and he realized that they were alone. “Peter, do you love me more than these others do?” Jesus asked.

Peter felt his face flush. He remembered his rash promise just a few weeks earlier, when Jesus had told them what would happen and how they would all forsake him. “Not I,” Peter had objected. “Never! Even if all these others desert you, I never will.”

Jesus had tried to tell him then that he was no different from the rest, but he had insisted that he was, that he was better. He had even gotten angry about it. “Even if I have to die with you,” he had claimed, “I will not deny you.”

Hard experience had taught Peter what he had refused to learn from Jesus, that he was no better than the rest. In fact, he suspected he was worse. His vain ambition, his ridiculous competitiveness, his obsessive concern with proving his superiority – he saw it now for what it really was, not the strength or advantage he had once supposed, but a weakness and a handicap. He resolved to fight it, and answered Jesus, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” but he was careful not to add “more than these.”

Jesus looked at Peter, his smile gone, and said simply, “Feed my lambs.”

A minute passed with the two of them continuing to sit near the fire. Again, Jesus spoke. “Peter, do you love me?”

Peter was not sure what to say. Was there something wrong with his previous answer? Had he said too much? Or not enough? “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” he answered again, this time stressing, “you know.” Surely Jesus did know, Peter hoped. Jesus had always seemed to know Peter better than Peter knew himself. Suddenly, from somewhere in the dark recesses in the back of his mind, the terrifying thought emerged. What if he doesn’t know? What if Jesus doesn’t know how I feel?

Jesus interrupted his terror. “Feed my sheep,” he said. And hardly missing a beat, he asked again, “Peter, do you love me?”

“So he doesn’t believe me,” Peter thought, and he wanted to run away. “Of course, why should he believe me? I’ve not been true to him. I said I would stand by him and I didn’t. I promised I wouldn’t betray him, and I did. No wonder he doesn’t believe me. I can’t change the past, and I’ll never escape it.”

Peter sat for a long time, trying to compose himself, wanting to be sure that when he spoke, he could say what he wanted to say without breaking down. Finally, he managed to croak it out, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” Jesus said to him a third time, “Feed my sheep.”

Peter felt his temper rise. He thought, “Sheep? What sheep? Why is he so concerned about sheep? Doesn’t he see how *I* feel? Can’t he see how hurt *I* am? And then another thought raced forward from the recesses of his mind, a memory of a moment spent with Jesus on a mountain top, and a voice that had thundered from the heavens, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.”

Listen. Just listen. The realization struck Peter like an unexpected blow, and raced through him like an electric current. He’d done it again. He’d gotten so caught up in the experience, so wrapped up in his own feelings of guilt, so desperate to convince Jesus that he loved him that he hadn’t listened. He hadn’t heard. He hadn’t connected Jesus’ question and Jesus’ response to his answer.

Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Do you love me? Feed my sheep. It became clear. The response Jesus wanted wasn’t a simple “yes” or “no.” Jesus was trying to get him to understand that we answer that question with our lives, with our actions, not just with words.

And as Jesus went on to foretell, Peter would answer that question with his life, and answer well. Peter was able to stand by his words, to express them in action with resolve.

And what about us? The question is timeless and universal. It is the only question that really matters. Jesus still asks, "Jim, do you love me?" Put your own name in there: _____, do you love me? Jesus is asking.

Remember, he isn't asking how you feel. If we simply tell him how we feel, we have misunderstood the question. We must give a better answer. We must let our lives speak for us. We must live "yes."

Amen.