

Fish Fries and Faithfulness

John 21:1-14

Crossroads Christian Church

John 21:15-19

April 10, 2013 Easter 3C

Whenever I read that question, "Do You Love Me?", that Jesus asked Peter, I remember a song by the same title from Fiddler on the Roof. Don't worry. I won't sing it. But let me set the scene and then read you the dialogue. It's set in Russia, over a hundred years ago, in a small community of Jews, who had lived with persecution for centuries. Their faith and their traditions had kept them strong. But times were changing. For all those years before, mothers and fathers had arranged the marriages of their children through matchmakers—but that's another musical. In this one, Golde and Tevya's daughter Hodel wants to marry for a strange new reason—because she is in love with the young man.

(Lyrics omitted to honor copyright. May be found online by searching for "Do You Love Me?" lyrics)

Let's look at the story from the Gospel again, and see what we can learn about why Jesus asked Peter the same question that Tevye asked Golde. "Do you love me?"

This beautiful story of the risen Christ shows Jesus meeting the disciples on their old home turf, the beautiful rural scene around the Sea of Galilee. They were back home again, escaped from the pressures and the dangers of the city. And since they were fishermen, they went back to their boats; to pick up on what was familiar in their lives, until they figured out what the risen Lord wanted them to do next. They spent the night in the boats, but didn't catch anything. Then, in that quiet, mysterious light of the early dawn, when shadows were deep, they saw someone walking on the beach. Maybe something about the way he walked made them remember when they were first called to lay aside their nets, to follow Jesus, and to fish for people.

"Hey, boys, you caught anything for breakfast?" The figure called to them from the beach—well, maybe not in those exact words. "No luck," they called back. "Try dropping your nets on the other side." Well, why not? Nothing else worked. So they did, and it was like every fish in the lake swam into that net! That had only happened one other time—and suddenly they knew who it was on the seashore. Peter, impetuous, emotional Peter, cried, "It's the Lord!" and jumped into the water, half-naked, half-wading, half-swimming, arms flailing, trying to get there quicker than the sailboat could carry him. What a reunion! They discovered that Jesus had started a charcoal fire. "Bring some of the fish," he said. "Come and have breakfast" So they had an early

morning fish fry. Jesus took some bread and gave it to them—just like he had to the great crowds earlier; just like he had in the Upper Room. And it wasn't just a meal, but it was communion—just like the old times, but not just like. For in the Upper Room, they were eating and drinking with one who was facing death. Now, on the beach, they were eating and drinking with the one who had conquered death.

What might Peter have been thinking as they finished breakfast? Sure, his heart was filled with joy, but maybe his heart still had a load of guilt. Just like Jesus had predicted, when the going got tough, Peter got going—the other way. Instead of standing up for Jesus, he had denied him. Once, twice, three times. "I don't even know the man." Should Peter fall on his knees and ask forgiveness? Should he just stay quiet and hope that Jesus had forgotten?

Then Jesus asked a question. Do you love me? But it was not as simple a question as it sounded. The Greek word Jesus used for love was *agape*—it means a self-giving kind of love, the love that God has for us, the love that doesn't look for repayment. And Peter responded, Yes Lord, I love you—but he used another Greek word—*phileo*—the kind of love that means "we're best buddies." If you understand the words in this way, the conversation sounded like this.

"Simon Peter, do you love me with all your being?"

"Yes, Lord, I like you a lot. You're my best friend."

"Then feed my lambs."

"Simon, son of John, do you love me with all your being?"

"Yes, Lord, I like you a lot. You're my best friend."

"Then take care of my sheep. Be their shepherd; be their pastor."

Finally, Jesus said, "Simon, son of John, do you like me a lot? Am I your best friend?"

Peter didn't even notice that Jesus had kicked it down a notch; he just got frustrated. "Lord, you know everything. You know that I'm your best friend."

"Then feed my sheep. But if you do, remember this. Now you're young, and you can go where you want. But when you get older, if you stay faithful to me, others will bind you and lead you where they want you to go. That may even be to a cross."

Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now Jesus had asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" It was a challenge, but it was also an act of forgiveness, and a commission. "You failed me, but now you can get up and try again, and it'll be all right. I still trust you."

Anna Murdock retells the story in a prayer-poem called "Breakfast Around a Bonfire."

When we put up a
"Gone Fishing" sign,
you meet us
at the lakeshore
and point to
the school of fish.

When we can see only
a bonfire that flickers
with shameful memories,
you invite us
to join you for breakfast
around a new bonfire.

You raise our heads
and our hopes,
O Risen One,
so that our faces
might reflect
your Light.

When our last memories
of eye contact with you
are those of omission
and denial,
you ask us to look
into your eyes
once more ...
and there we see
love and forgiveness.

When we hunger
to be the disciples
you have called us to be,
you hand us
bread and fish
and affirm our calling.

And when we stammer
and struggle
with words of love
for you,

you help us
find the words.

O Resurrected One,
thank you
for this breakfast
around a bonfire.

Amen.

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Jesus encounters and challenges Peter—and us—with honest love. Jesus offers Peter—and us—both forgiveness and invitation. That invitation is to “feed my sheep;” to care for and nurture the people in need around us; whether they are in need physically, spiritually, or emotionally.

We are here in church because, like Peter, we love Jesus Christ. Our love isn’t perfect, and neither was Peter’s. But Jesus is okay with that. We stumble, and he helps us up. He encourages us to keep on going, to keep on growing, to keep on trying. Last week, Thomas found out how important it was to have faith, to believe. But this week we find out that faith leads to action. The Church is the body of Christ on earth, but it has to be the body of Christ in action. If we love Christ, we act lovingly towards others. We feed the sheep. We bring Christ’s love into our family, into our workplace, into every part of our lives. We love because Christ first loved us. Amen.