

“Do You Love Me?”

Introduction: Last week, as we continue to consider some of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, we saw how Jesus met a handful of his followers as a figure shrouded in the early morning mist of the Sea of Galilee, calling out to his disciples and moving them to wonder why they had been out fishing all night but were coming back to shore with empty nets. We saw how Jesus used that emptiness as an object lesson, that if his followers were to fish for people, as he was in the process of preparing them to do, that they would need to seek his guidance and direction.

Each gospel account, it is important to know, did not end with the resurrection. Rather, the resurrection serves as the beginning of what God was going to do through his church, how the followers of Jesus were being called to bear witness to the goodness and beauty of Jesus, and to the justice, community, and hope that he was making available to all.

What we'll see this morning is that not only will his followers need the guidance and direction of Jesus, they will also need his healing touch so that they, so that we, do not minister out of anger or fear, but out of the love God has for us. “Do you love me?” is the question we'll hear from Jesus this morning as he puts it to the disciple named Peter, in the wake of Peter having denied knowing him three times. It could also be a question that, deep in his heart, Peter had for Jesus. [READ]

I. Sitting around the fire

A. So, after gracing his tired and hungry fishermen with a deliciously grilled breakfast, it turned out that while they were finished with breakfast, Jesus was not finished with them, at least one of them – Peter. You actually have to wonder what had been running through Peter's mind as he had sat around that charcoal fire. For at the last such fire that he had sat around, things hadn't gone so well. In the only other occurrence of that word in the NT (John 18:18), Peter had stood warming himself by such a fire in the courtyard of the high priest, just after the arrest of Jesus. There, when asked if he was one of the disciples of Jesus, by those who through they had seen the two together, Peter denied it, not once, not twice, but three times. After his third denial, Peter heard a rooster crow just as Jesus had said would happen, despite Peter's protest that he would never abandon Jesus, even after, he imagined, all the others had (Jn. 13:36-38; Ma. 26:31-35). Hearing that rooster, having to face what was really in his heart, caused Peter to flee the scene, but not before he saw Jesus looking across the courtyard, “straight at him” (Lk. 22:61).

B. What that episode had done to Peter's sense of well-being is difficult for us to say. I'm sure it tore him up inside. I'm sure it left him feeling incredibly guilty. And I'd imagine that guilt had even begun to turn into shame. If guilt is something we feel because we have done something bad, shame is when we come to believe that we really are bad. You recall perhaps the oddest part of the whole experience out in that boat – when Peter saw it was Jesus on the shore – that he put on the cloak he had taken off, and *then* jumped into the water and swam to shore. I'm sure that in the excitement he wasn't thinking straight. But I also wonder whether wrapping his outer garment around him was a way of trying to hide the shame he felt, a bit like Adam and Eve made coverings of fig leaves to try and cover their own sense of shame (Ge. 3:7).

C. Not only did Jesus know that Peter had denied knowing him, he also knew that unless Peter could move beyond his guilt and shame, that he wouldn't truly be able to serve Jesus well. Unless Peter knew he was loved, he would never really be able to share that love with others.

It almost seems too obvious to say but we as people are very much affected by our past. These influences – parents, friends, experiences, environments – contribute greatly to who we are today. Many have been wonderfully positive. Yet, many of us also have had to deal with difficult, even dysfunctional pasts. Some of these difficulties result from things done to us, while others result from poor choices having been made by us. Like Peter, when we find ourselves under pressure, we are often not at our best!

Often, we try to move beyond our difficult past in one of two ways, neither one of them good.

1. The first is to try and “outrun” the past, spending our life working hard for Jesus. On the surface, this seems like excellent energy, poured out for Jesus. Underneath the surface, such zeal can lead to being intolerant or inflexible or impatient toward those who aren't as serious as we see ourselves to be or toward those who aren't living as we think they should. We actually end up serving out of anger, at ourselves, as well as at others, and not out of love.

2. A second option is to try and bury the past, serving God as if nothing ever happened. But such service ends up being done out of fear – will we, could we, fail again?

II. Walking on the beach

A. Jesus doesn't want us, nor did he want Peter, in either of these places, so he took Peter for a walk on the beach (cf. v. 20). During that walk, Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved him, beginning with Peter's bravado that he would actually love Jesus more than his other disciples would. Jesus then repeated the question a couple more times, not because he didn't understand Peter's answer, at first, but because he wanted to make sure Peter understood. He wanted to bring Peter to a place where he could confront and name his demons and, in the process, be vulnerable with another who would continue to love him, which is often what the healing of shame needs.

B. Throughout it all, Jesus was shifting Peter's attention away from the story of shame he had started to tell himself, and toward the story of Jesus and his great love. Jesus, remember, began this whole conversation with love by feeding Peter breakfast, and then he continued to pour his love over Peter by letting him know with each remembrance that he was wanted in his service. Jesus' concern is not whether Peter is willing to lay down his life for him; it's whether Peter knows that Jesus has first laid down his life for Peter.

C. As Jesus invites us to participate in revealing his goodness and beauty to a watching and needy world, and to be a shepherd like the Shepherd with the flock under our care, he calls us to first acknowledge our need for him and the healing he brings from guilt and shame. He calls us to stop living in the false story that says we are bad and live in the true story that declares we are loved, beyond what we could ask or imagine. And then he wants us to live from, not for, that love. That love is displayed on the cross. As you make your way forward, how might Jesus want to walk with you? What might he be asking you to name, so that the process of healing can begin? How might you need to hear that yes, he absolutely, truly loves you?