

April 18, 2010 3rd Sunday of Easter *Do You Love Me?*
John 21:1-19

Easter was over and they had all gone back to work. Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, and two other of Jesus' disciples, had gone back to their fishing. They set out from Tiberias into the Galilean Sea that night and didn't catch a thing. After Easter, life must be just the same old thing it was before. After Easter, after the joyous celebration in the presence of the risen Lord, after Jesus had appeared to them, showed them his hands and his side, blessed them with his own peace and gave them the promise of the Holy Spirit, after Easter, back to everyday life when these memories fade and the demands of day to day existence once again find their priority, after Easter, life does not appear to have changed all that much. They went back to work that night and had trouble even producing the basics of life for themselves. After Easter, it seems, life must be just the same old thing it was before.

But just after daybreak back at the shore about 100 yards from the boat, a stranger stood on the beach. As the sun began to rise that morning the stranger called out to them, "Children, children, you have no fish, have you?" They didn't know who he was but they answered him, "No!" He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat and you will find some." And they did. And the narrator of the Gospel of John reports that their net held so many fish they could not haul them all in. Then finally in the morning light one disciple recognizes the stranger, "It is the Lord!" As they rush back to shore with their now bountiful catch, Jesus has a fire going and breakfast is ready. He asks for some of their fish to share. After Easter, these children broke break and ate fish with their Lord.

You see, Jesus was right there all the time after Easter, but they didn't recognize him. As Jesus called out to them that morning from the shore, couldn't you hear him saying, "Children, I'm right

here.” After Easter Jesus is here with you. Do you recognize him? In the midst of the provision that you are provided each day, do you see him at work in your life? In your everyday, day to day business as usual world do you hear him call out to you? After Easter, now that you’ve gone back to work, do you know Jesus is here now with you?

If you have a little trouble with this after Easter you’re in good company. For that’s exactly what was going on with these seven followers of Jesus. Jesus, you see, calls them “children,” children who are not yet capable of full understanding. Children need patient, caring love. Such is the love of Jesus for his children. Such is his love for you. After Easter, Jesus says, “Children, I’m here.”

After breakfast as they stood around the warm fire that morning Jesus asks Peter a question:

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?

This is a striking question, a painful question for Peter. Peter remembers the last time they had eaten together was the Passover meal the night of Jesus’ betrayal. At the meal Jesus told them that where he was going they could not follow. Peter was the only one to speak up and say,

Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you!

In response to this bold declaration Jesus rightly predicted that Peter would deny that he even knew Jesus, not once, but three times. After Easter, after this breakfast around the charcoal fire, Peter remembers his denial of his Lord that night at the charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest. As he warmed himself he was asked, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” to which he answered, “I am not.”

After Easter, in the morning, Peter remembers all the times he had denied Jesus. After Easter, Peter is faced with his failure as he faced his Lord. So after Easter, Jesus asks him, “Do you love

me?” As the painful memory of his utter lack of love wells up in his heart, Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “There,” Peter must have thought to himself, “I have said it and I mean it this time.” Then Jesus asks him again, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter responds again more boldly, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Uh, oh!” Peter must have thought to himself, “Jesus remembers what I did as well as I do—maybe he wants to make sure—and I am sure.” Then Jesus asks again, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Here the narrator of the Gospel lets us know that Peter felt hurt because he asked him a third time. Peter responded, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

You see, your Lord knows the human heart very well. Healing and wholeness follow failure only after you face that failure, look it in the eye for what it is, find forgiveness, and then move on. By his grace Jesus, who knows well the three-fold pain in Peter’s heart, brings Peter to confirm again his love for his Lord, not once, not twice, but three times. Each “yes” declared in the morning heals each “no” declared in the night. In this way healing comes after Easter. After Easter Jesus says “Children, I forgive.”

Brothers and sisters, how many times have you and I said “no” to your Lord in the night? What are the numbers of your failures in your life? For every one of those your Lord asks you now in the morning, “Do you love me?” Jesus takes no more pleasure in asking you to confirm your love for him after each of your failures any more than he did with Peter after his own. It’s just that Jesus knows your heart very well. Your heart just won’t heal until you, like Peter, face your own failure, look it in the eye for what it is, find his forgiveness, and then move on.

If you have a little trouble with this after Easter you’re in good company. For that’s exactly what was going on with Peter. Jesus, you see, calls his disciples “children,” children who are not yet capable of full understanding. Children need patient, caring love.

Such is the love of Jesus for his children. Such is his love for you. After Easter Jesus says, “Children, I’m here; I forgive.”

Now, after all this, did Peter really love Jesus? After all this, do you really love Jesus? We have to examine the text a bit more closely to find the answer, but it is there. You see, there is more than one Greek word that is translated into English as “love.” Jesus and Peter each use two different Greek words for “love.” Every time Peter responds to Jesus and says, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” Peter uses the Greek word “philia”—this is friendship: love between close friends. It is as if Peter is saying, “You know I am your friend.”

But friendship is not what Jesus is asking him. Jesus, on the other hand, is using another Greek word for “love.” The first and second times Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me?” Jesus uses the word “agape” (not “philia”). “Agape” is more than friendship but self-sacrificing love, love that asks for nothing in return. This is God’s love. So Jesus asks Peter the first time (to use the Greek word), “Do you *agape* me?” Peter responds, “Yes, Lord, I *philo* you.” Jesus asks, “Do you love me and ask for nothing in return?” Peter responds, “Yes, Lord, I love you like a friend.” So Jesus asks again, “Do you *agape* me?” Peter responds again, “Yes, Lord, you know that I *philo* you.”

Peter doesn’t get it. Friendship is not relationship with Jesus in all its fullness. When Jesus commanded them to “love one another as I have loved you” Jesus was not talking about friendship but agape—self-sacrificing love, love that asks for nothing in return. That’s what John 3:16 is all about:

God so agaped the world that he gave his only begotten son....

Jesus did not live, die, and rise from the dead for friendship but for eternal life—only agape love makes for that.

But Peter doesn't get it. So finally, in grace, Jesus takes a step back. When he asks Peter the third time, "Do you love me?", Jesus uses the word *philia*, as if to say, "OK, are you at least my friend?" to which Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, I have been telling you three times now that I am your friend!" Jesus responds this time as he had the other two:

I have work for you to do...(specifically)...feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

Jesus can only count on Peter to be his friend but he commissions him nevertheless.

After Easter what about you? Do you really love Jesus? Do you agape him? Do you love him in self-sacrificing love? Do you love him and ask for nothing in return? Do you love one another as he loves you?

If you have a little trouble with this after Easter you're in good company. For that's exactly what was going on with these seven followers of Jesus. Jesus, you see, calls them "children," children who are not yet capable of full understanding. Children need patient, caring love. Such is the love of Jesus for his children. Such is his love for you.

After Easter Jesus says, "Children, I'm right here. Children, I forgive you. Children, I have work for you to do."

After Easter Jesus asks, "Do you love me?"

Do you?

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