

John 21:1-19 After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together. ³ Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴ Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, do you have any fish?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved therefore said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was stripped for work, and threw himself into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, but about a hundred yards off. ⁹ When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. ¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me."

There are a number of important questions that one might ask over the course of one's life: Like, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" That's an important question that even our younger members might have started asking themselves. As they grow older, the big question will become, "Where should I go to school?" Or, "What should my major be?" Then maybe a few years later a different question comes to mind: "Do I want to marry this person?" And after years of marriage and work in a particular field, perhaps a person might start asking, "Am I happy? Am I satisfied with my life?" Then years later, after kids and grandkids and retirement, other important questions that will pop up in many people's minds, "What's going to happen after I die? What will happen to my family? What will happen to me?"

They're all important questions, all very serious questions that I think most people will face and struggle with during the course of their lives, but they all pale in comparison to the #1 most important question in life. And that question will serve as our Sermon theme this morning, and it is this: **Do you love me?**

Let's just set the stage a little bit before we get to this question. We have several of the disciples out fishing. It was a long, frustrating night, not even a single bite. They're about to call it quits when some mysterious person on the shore shouts out that they should try one last time. The sun is just coming up—perhaps it's reflecting off the water into their eyes—so they don't know who this person is, but they decide they might as well try. They follow the instructions, and suddenly their nets are filled to bursting! This must have reminded them of another time when their nets were filled to bursting and threatened to drag their ships down. That had been about three years prior, and it had been Jesus standing on the shore that time that caused the great

catch of fish. And so in their excitement, the disciples look back to the shore and realize who it was this time: it was again their teacher, their friend, their Lord—Jesus.

Peter, always the impulsive one, he could not simply wait for the boats to reach the shore; instead, he jumped right into the water and swam to shore to see his old friend. And I wonder at what point during his swim he started remembering everything that had happened over the past several weeks. I imagine his stomach began sinking like a rock as he realized that He Peter, was going to be alone on the shore with Jesus whom he had adamantly denied knowing. He arrived on the shore, and there was Jesus, and there was Peter, and they were alone; and thousands of thoughts must have been screaming through Peter's head, but Jesus didn't seem to notice.

But Peter, I imagine, was remembering vividly the events of the past couple weeks; how Jesus had said in the upper room that night that Peter would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. And Peter, he couldn't believe it, he wouldn't allow it to happen! And so he boldly announced loud enough for everyone to hear, ***"Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away."*** ***"Even if I must DIE with you, I will NEVER deny you!"*** And just a few hours later, there Peter was, standing by a charcoal fire, and people started recognizing him. He had been one of Jesus' close followers had he not? ***"Surely you are one of them!"*** they said. And Peter, to his horror, denied even knowing Jesus. He cursed and He swore, ***"He did not know the man!"*** What a change in tune for the man who had just proudly claimed he would even be willing to die for his Lord.

And the worst part of all—then the rooster crowed, and then Peter looked at Jesus, and Jesus looked right back at him—Jesus knew what Peter had done. In his hour of need, Peter had disowned his friend. And now there they stood together once more, quietly on the edge of the sea, alone, watching the other disciples struggling to bring in this catch of fish. There was a large elephant in the room together with them, and Peter knew it, and Jesus knew it, and it must have been awkward to say the least. But still, Jesus said nothing. As Peter looked down at the charcoal fire that Jesus had carefully prepared, every moment that ticked by must have reminded Peter all the more of those hours he had spent by the charcoal fire at Jesus' trial.

Finally, the awkward silence is broken when the other disciples reach the shore. Peter, likely happy for an excuse to get away from Jesus for a moment, volunteers to go and haul the catch of fish ashore by himself, all 153 of them. And then they eat. And then they all had their fill. And then in the presence of the rest of disciples Jesus finally addresses Peter. And He asks him that important question from earlier.

Jesus says, ***"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"*** And Peter replied, ***"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."*** It is important to note that in English, we have the same word "love" repeated six times in three verses, but in the language they were speaking there were different words for "love" that had different ideas and meanings. When Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him, He was really saying, ***"Simon, do you love me with the type of love where you would be willing to sacrifice your life for me if it came down to it?"*** And Jesus also adds, ***"Would you be more willing to lay down your life for me than any of these other disciples would be willing to do the same?"*** Jesus is hearkening back to that bold claim of Peter, ***"Though they all fall away because of You, I will never fall away."*** And what does Peter answer? Not, "Yes, Lord, I would die for you." Instead he replies with a different type of love in mind. He says, ***"Yes Lord, I love you...like a friend."***

So Jesus amends the question, ***"Simon, Son of John, do you love me?"*** Notice he drops the comparison to everyone else's level of love. So He's saying, Simon, would you really be willing to sacrifice yourself for Me? Is this the type of love you have for me at all? And again, Peter says, ***"Lord, you know that I love you...like a friend."***

And finally Jesus gets to the heart of the issue, asking the third time, ***“Simon, do you love me?”*** But this time Jesus steals the word that Peter had been using. He simply asks, *“Simon, do you even love me as a friend?”* And Peter is grieved, not only because Jesus had to ask him this question a third time, but because now Jesus brought it down to the level of merely friendly love. Peter has been exposed.

Now, Jesus wasn't doing this to merely to be mean to Peter. He wasn't just trying to call him out in front of the other disciples; it was nothing like that. Jesus wasn't going to dance around the issue of Peter's sin, because when it comes to sin, the worst thing you can do for someone is to ignore it, and the best thing you can do is expose it for them. And that's what Jesus does—He comes in reminding Peter of what he'd done and purposefully causes him to be overcome by sorrow over his sin. Jesus is exposing the sin. Because Jesus knows that it is through sorrow over sin and repentance that a person will finally turn to Him for forgiveness. This is just as Paul writes to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 7: ***“Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation.”*** It is not out of desire to get back at Peter, but desire for Peter's salvation that Jesus asks Him that important question: **Do you love me?**

Let's ask ourselves the same question today—Do I love Jesus? What is the real answer to that important question? Before we get too far with our thoughts, let's let Jesus define for us what love of God looks like. He says in John 14, ***“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”*** I don't think I need to go too in depth about the many ways in which we have failed to truly love Jesus, because we all know just how effective we've been at keeping His commandments. We know about our secret sins which are hidden from everyone else. We know about our public sins in which instead of glorifying Christ we have splashed mud on His name. We know we haven't come close to loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind.

Maybe we do have love for the LORD in our hearts, we just often love ourselves more. Do you remember Jesus' specific question? *“Do you love me with that self-sacrificial love where you put yourself and your interests aside for me? Would you sacrifice yourself for me?”* And looking at the evidence of my life, the answer is clearly “No.” For how often is my own happiness, my own sinful desire, my own greed, my own resentment—how often am I unwilling to let go of even *those* things for Christ? I suppose if Jesus were here asking me, *“Do you love me with that self-sacrificial love?”* I would have to answer with Peter, *“I love you...like a friend, Lord.”* Knowing that this is the only type of love with which we can truthfully respond—sure makes you feel pretty unworthy doesn't it? And that's a good mindset to have. Because again, ***“Godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation.”*** So let's not just stop right there with the realization of our unworthiness and our sorrow over sin—let us now turn to Jesus for that forgiveness which we so desperately need.

We said at the outset that this is one of life's most important questions: ***Do you love me?*** But up to this point, that question has been a question that Jesus was asking of Peter and us. But the real #1 most important question in life is not “Do I love Jesus?” The truly most important question you can ask is to look at the Lord and ask, **Do YOU love me?** And the answer to that question is, without a shadow of a doubt, “YES.”

Peter, by this point, had already received some affirmation from His Savior; probably about a week before this he had been there with all of the rest of the disciples when Jesus appeared and showed them his hands and side. And he had concluded that encounter by saying that they were all to be the witnesses of these things and that He was going to send them out as His missionaries. So Peter had already learned in a general way that Jesus had forgiven him and moved on and, yes, still did want Him as His disciple. But any of us would understand if perhaps Peter still had some lingering doubt that Jesus really had forgiven *him*. Maybe Jesus just had lumped Peter into that group, but really was thinking about everyone but Peter.

Well, now, Jesus is talking specifically to Peter. He's standing before Peter and holding out to Him the proof of His suffering and death with the marks of the nails. He's reassuring him three times, once for every rejection,

that He still wants Peter in His fold. He's impressing upon Peter that no matter how terrible his denial was, no matter how miserable his failure, Jesus still loved Him with an unfailing love. Not saying it specifically, but implicitly reassuring Peter, "Yes, even YOUR sins are forgiven." He's reminding Peter that His blood was shed to cover ALL sin. Even that which had driven Peter to such depths of sorrow.

This same Peter would write years later in his epistle from 1 Peter 2: ***"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."*** Peter knew that darkness which he spoke of: the feeling of unshakeable guilt, the crushing weight of sin and grief, he knew the darkness of despair. Yet Jesus had brought him from the brink of despair through His love for Peter. Because Peter knew this, he could go on serving his Savior. Even though Peter couldn't claim to truly love Jesus, He could claim definitively that Jesus truly loved Him.

At the end of our text, Jesus says that the day would come when Peter would be taken where he would not want to go and his hands would be stretched out and He would die. By this, Jesus means that Peter would be crucified on a cross. It's not recorded for us in the Bible, but an ancient historian named Eusebius records for us that Peter was taken captive by the wicked Roman Emperor Nero, and that he had Peter crucified on a cross as well. He also records that Peter requested that He be crucified upside down, because he did not consider himself worthy to die in the same way as his Savior. Peter had been restored by that Savior from the darkness of His sin, so even in the face of pain and death, he knew that he would be restored to life by His Savior again. He had a joy that could not be taken away.

So, let's ask that all important question one more time? **Do You love me?** Does Jesus truly love ME? Yes, He does. He loves you with that sacrificial love; where He put His own interests and His own comfort and His own life aside, because He knew He would be required to give it all up to save you. He knows the depths of your sins, He knows your failure to love Him, and yet He loved you with an unfailing love to take all your guilt away. He comes to you patiently, finding each of us, sheep that love to wander, and restoring us. He calls us out of the darkness of sin into the marvelous light of his grace. He comes through His word to reassure each of you, that, yes, His blood even covered those sins which seem so unforgiveable to you. And this is not a general love and forgiveness that God is simply lumping you in with everyone else, but He has truly forgiven each of you specifically.

In the light of peace and forgiveness, He too invites us to serve him; to put aside the sins which so easily ensnare us, to repent of them, and to turn to Him trusting in his forgiveness. To live new lives that are governed not by our selfish desires, but that are governed by the love of God—giving thanks to Him who loved you and gave Himself for you.

And I'd like to leave you with the same words Jesus left Peter with, there on the beach at the Sea of Galilee. After that difficult discussion, after patiently restoring Peter and giving him a sobering glance into the future, Jesus said to Peter, simply, "Follow Me." That comforting exhortation is for you and me, as well. The sins of your past are covered in Jesus' blood. Your future is in His hands. He wants each of you, "Follow Him." There's not one of you that's left out of that invitation. So let us do so, following Jesus all the days of our lives, confident that the answer to life's most important question is undoubtedly **"Yes. Jesus does love me."** He loved me and gave Himself for me! Now I am His, and He is mine. I have been bought with the precious blood of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.