

May 1, 2022

“Do You Love Me?”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake

Scripture Reading
John 21:4-19

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net to 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 there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt 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.

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Sermon

The confirmands and I were talking about what comes to mind, what images or experiences come up when we think of God? One of my answers was Fried Okra. They looked at me kind of

funny but I went on to explain that my Grandmother, Momma Fern, was a person that showed me absolute and unconditional love.

When we would go to visit her I would be greeted first by a wonderful smell that led me directly to the kitchen and to her standing by the stove, usually in a flowery housecoat and an apron, making fried okra, just for me, making me feel very special because it was my favorite. She showed me her love again and again no matter how many times I messed up. I connect these memories to who God is, a forgiving God that just keeps loving and forgiving, calling us to be good people even when we mess up.

In this story, Jesus is on the beach and is “ghosting” his disciples again. Not what the young people call ghosting, which is just ignoring you by not returning texts, but ghosting because in these stories he is the risen Christ, appearing here and there, first as a stranger and then as Jesus once some event occurs.

In this story they recognize him when they follow his advice and are blessed with abundance, an abundance of fish, so overflowing they can barely haul it to shore. The point being that without God in our life, we come up empty and hopeless, with God, our spirits are overflowing with abundance and hope.

Which is leading us to this story of forgiveness with Peter. When Peter recognizes Jesus, he strangely puts his clothes on and jumps in the water. What we see in Peter is a shame reaction. He is full of shame at the sight of Jesus because he denied him three times.

But when Peter arrives on the beach in his sopping wet clothes, he is not greeted by a Jesus who has come to condemn, punish, or shame him. Instead he is greeted by the smell of something cooking, Jesus standing over the fire ready to feed him breakfast. Now this is “The Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords”, but what is he doing? He is showing love by serving the disciples breakfast, a simple and humble act of service. Showing us again that the heart of Jesus’s message was love, forgiveness, and service.

What follows after breakfast is a dialogue in which Jesus lets Peter know that he is not only forgiven but he is called to follow him. In the act of asking Peter three times if he loves him, Peter gets three opportunities to undo his three denials of Jesus. Peter is forgiven by Jesus and then sent forth to continue his work, to “feed his sheep” Peter is called to be a shepherd of Jesus’s followers, to feed and to tend them. So even after Peter failed Jesus multiple times, Jesus forgives him, releases him from his shame, and uses him to do his work in the world.

Not one of us doesn't know what shame feels like, and how good it feels to be released from it, restored and redeemed. This is important to know that even with our flaws, we are lovable, redeemable and God is calling us into service.

There is another very important takeaway from this. This conversation with Peter isn't like what we might say to each other as leverage in a relationship, "if you loved me honey, you'd take out the trash without me asking, or if you loved me you would just let me watch baseball all day."

This conversation between Jesus and Peter tells us what happens when we profess our love for God. When we do that, things change in us, without that shame and regret we are free to show our love to God by doing the work of feeding God's sheep, tending God's lambs.

Now notice that Jesus isn't saying that his love is contingent on Peter's answer. Jesus has already given Peter his unconditional love and forgiveness, he is saying if you say you love me then show it in your actions. That's an important distinction. Now stitch this on a throw pillow: God's love is never dependent on our actions, but God feeling our love is.

I can't say this enough, in the last century the theology that came out of the religious right that Christianity was solely about saying the magic words and having a free pass to eternity is misleading. That isn't how we show God love just by a profession of our faith.

When you commit your life to God you commit yourself to follow Jesus' path, by showing others love and care, by small acts of kindness, like making breakfast or fried okra, and by forgiving, and not shaming others. But also as a church to "Feed God's Sheep" in bigger ways, like the founding of the Food Pantry, and by working for change so that no child in our land goes to bed hungry.

Jesus asked that we follow him by feeding his sheep, this of course, has that double meaning of feeding each other spiritually but remember Jesus is living in an arid, economically deprived area where the Romans were taxing people beyond their ability to feed themselves. Real hunger is a reality in his day that weighs heavy on his heart and on his mind.

To think of this scripture just metaphorically is much more comfortable than having to tackle the issues of hunger in our country and our world. Much more comfortable than thinking about our hungry veterans, the mentally ill, the homeless that get spat on and told to "get a job". Much more comfortable than dealing with the fact that many people with jobs still don't have enough to eat and get accused of gaming the system by politicians and the people behind them in line at the checkout counter when they pay for their groceries with government funds.

This is something for us to work out for ourselves as a church and as people, when we answer Jesus's call to follow him what are we agreeing to?

I'm not saying all this so that you think, "I'm not doing enough" or to shame us into action. Our society will never change through shame, all that does is create more resentment. But if we can tap into our love for God then it automatically shifts our priorities and energizes our spirits to go and show God our love each and every day with our hearts and our actions. May you feel that energy of your love for God circulate through your very being, giving you what you need to go and follow Jesus and feed his sheep. AMEN

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follow Jesus' path
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