

DO YOU LOVE ME MORE THAN THESE?

The Third Sunday of Easter

May 4, 2025

Two weeks ago, we walked together as a church walked together through the two dark days in Holy Week. On Maundy Thursday as we experienced Jesus' final Passover meal with his disciples, his betrayal, and struggle in the Garden, and then on Good Friday, we experienced Jesus' trials, torture, and execution.

It was during those two dark days so long ago that the Apostle Peter experienced the darkest and most painful night of his life. After having previously declaring his undying devotion to Jesus, on that Thursday night he faced the full weight of his own frail shameful humanity. After Jews had spotted him near Jesus at his trial, he was asked three times by three individuals; "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" And each time he adamantly denied it.

Are you his disciple – I am not, are you his disciple – I am not, are you his disciple – I am not. Three chances to affirm his allegiance; three times he failure his Lord. On that dark night Peter could not have sunken to any darker depths of despair. He who had been Jesus' most passionate follower, now three times denied having ever known him.

After Jesus' burial he had miraculously been seen alive by his disciples three days later. Today's gospel reading picks up several days later on

the shore of the Sea of Tiberius; the Sea of Galilee. This passage reveals to us the heights of God's love, the glory of Peter's redemption, and a challenge for all of us. Seven of the disciples had decided to go back to their familiar vocation in Galilee – they went fishing.

They rowed out onto the sea and the sun was setting. To say that it was going to be a rough night, would be a major understatement! All night long they struggled with their nets out on the water; and the longer they struggled, the more they sweat and cursed. One hour turned into two, and then four, then six, and still not a single fish! Never in their lives had any of them felt so utterly helpless.

Dawn began to break, revealing these men utterly exhausted and sweaty and dirty and stinky. It was in that moment that they heard a voice calling out to them from the shore; "Friends, have you caught no fish? Throw your nets on the other side of the boat!" – – "Throw your nets on the other side of the boat? Are you kidding me?"

Now, what I imagine happening the next moment was not recorded in the gospels. If it had been written down it would have looked like a bunch of dollar signs and exclamation points and asterisks and pound signs as they shouted out one expletive after another after yet another at that jerk calling to them from the shore! Who does this stupid idiot think he is anyway?!?

The disciples next action reveals how desperate they had become. They actually complied with the stranger's insane suggestion! They tossed their nets one final time into the water. And when they did, they were utterly stunned as the water in front of them boiled with the flipping and flopping of a multitude of fish! They began hauling up an incredible weight of fish; more fish than they could have ever imagined in their wildest dreams. It was nothing less than a bonafide miracle.

Eventually the seven disciples finished pulling up the nets and were able to turn again to look shockingly at that man on the shore – that idiot who was now revealed to them as a brilliant fisherman – they noticed near him a fire burning, and fish on a spit. John, of course, was the first to recognize the man as Jesus. It took a while for them to haul their nets and the multitude of fish to shore.

They got out of their boats and approached Jesus. Peter, whose mind and heart were still in a dark shame based, grief-stricken place from his three denials, approached Jesus as well, his closeness to his Lord now clouded by his betrayals.

Then Jesus, in deep compassion and love, looked into the eyes of Peter, and through his eyes, into his soul. And it was there that he saw the shame and guilt that was blocking Peter's tender soul from his Lord. Jesus knew that the only way to heal Peter's thrice betrayal would be a thrice affirmation.

And so, Jesus spoke: “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” ‘Yes, Lord,’ Peter replied, ‘you know I love you.’ ‘Then feed my lambs,’ Jesus told him. Jesus repeated the question: ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ Peter said, ‘you know I love you.’ ‘Then take care of my sheep,’ Jesus said. A third time he asked him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, ‘Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Then feed my sheep.’” Three betrayals, and now, three glorious opportunities for Peter to express his deep passionate devoted love for his Lord. Peter was now cleansed and redeemed. He had faced the darkest parts of his human weakness and now walked out into the light of God’s glorious love and forgiveness.

My dear sisters and brothers, Peter’s story with Jesus, is also your story and mine. Oh, how confidently and passionately we may proclaim our faithfulness and devotion to Jesus, only to find ourselves stumbling and falling and denying him as Lord of our lives. There are many ways we might deny him. We may struggle with doubts, or have our priorities all backwards, or live by the wrong set of values. Our denial may happen once, or twice, or several times.

There are three words in today’s gospel that were a kind of a test for Peter, and a test for you and me; they are the words, “more than these.” Jesus began his questioning of Peter by saying: “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Now, if we had been on that shore, we might have seen what Jesus was referring to, but we weren’t

there. Do you love me more than these? There are at least two possibilities. As they had just come in from fishing, Jesus may have pointed to the nets and fish and been asking, do you love me more than fishing; do you love me more than this work on the lake that means so much to you.

Or as Jesus spoke to Peter he may have pointed to the other disciples and been saying, do you love me more than these other disciples? We will never know with absolute certainty what Jesus meant. But I think that's a good thing. It allows us to answer Jesus' question in our own way given our own unique circumstances.

You see, Jesus words to Peter have reverberated down through the centuries, speaking to each and every disciple of Jesus Christ, asking all of them, and you and me, the same question, do you love me more than these? The first deacon Steven answered the question well as his broken body lay bloody and cold beneath a pile of stones. Stoned to death because of his testimony for Jesus. The apostle Peter at the very end of his life answered the question well; do you love me more than these. His answer was seen in his body hanging upside down and impaled on a Roman cross.

After the first four hundred years of Christian persecution, of being marginalized and maligned and rejected, the Christian faith suddenly became the religion of the Empire. And many of those who chose to

align their faith with this new position of secular power and control, may not have answered Jesus' question well.

The question he posed to Peter reaches down to you and me. Joe, do you love me more than these? Bill, do you love me more than these? Elaine, do you love me more than these? There are a multitude of things that we might from time-to-time prioritize in our lives, and align ourselves with, that, if we were totally honest with ourselves, might demonstrate that we love them more than we love Jesus Christ. These things could be a hobby, a sport, a vocation, a belief system about Jesus, a nation, a political party, Christianity itself, the Episcopal Church, and the list of possibilities can go on and on.

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