

John 21:1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. ² Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 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 after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish 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, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² 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. ¹³ Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time that Jesus appeared 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." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ 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." ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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." ¹⁹ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

Jesus's Most Important Question

John 21:1-19

Someday I am going to preach a series of sermons on the questions that Jesus asks. He doesn't ask very many, but the ones he does ask directly to people are not so much to get information from them as to challenge them to examine themselves more deeply. You never hear Jesus striking up a conversation with the question, "So, where are you from?" His questions are pretty much always questions you need to be asking yourself, not questions he needs the answers to.

Sometimes his questions express his frustration AND challenge others. Like when he asks the disciples who wake him up in a panic in the middle of the storm, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Or to Peter when he begins to sink while walking on the water, "Why did you doubt?" And the disciples when they don't grasp his teaching, "Do you still not understand?" And finally, when he can't take it anymore, "How much longer must I put up with you?"

More than anything, though, Jesus' questions challenge people to look within. Two blind men come to him for healing: "*Do you believe I am able to do this?*"

He asks his disciples, "*Who do people say that I am?*" When they give various answers, he then drills the question to them, "*And you, who do you say that I am?*"

"*What do you want me to do for you?*" is one of his most powerful questions.

When his dear friend Lazarus dies, and Lazarus' sister, Martha, confronts him with the fact that he wasn't there to heal him, he says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. *Do you believe this?*"

Some of his most heartbreaking questions are asked in the last twenty-four hours of his life. When he tells Peter and the others to stay awake with him in the garden, he goes off to pray, then comes back and finds them sleeping, and asks, "*Simon, are you asleep? Could you not stay awake with me one hour?*"

And perhaps the most convicting question, "*Judas, would you betray me with a kiss?*"

And the most heartbreaking question of all: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*"

But, I believe the most important question Jesus ever asks anyone, he asks in this scene we just watched. Three times, "*Simon son of John, do you love me?*"

You know where things were left between Jesus and Peter. The last time they had seen each other was that last supper when Jesus told them he'd be killed, and Peter said he wasn't going to let that happen and Jesus said, "Peter, before the rooster crows in the morning you will have denied me three times." In Peter's mind, that was impossible; something he would never do. But before the night had passed, he had done what he thought he'd never do.

We don't know what Peter thought after all of that. But we can imagine. We can imagine that he thought all the other stuff about his being the foundational rock on which the church would be built, that was probably off. In fact, the whole thing was probably off, disciple, friend, everything. He showed he couldn't be trusted. He let the most important man in his life down. Why should he think anything else?

So when they're coming to shore and they realize it is Jesus calling to them,

Peter can't get there quickly enough. He can't be thinking things are back to normal, but at least *Jesus is back*. So he jumps in the water and swims ashore. Jesus is there; whatever his denials meant, they didn't mean it was all over. Jesus is there. There's grace simply in his presence.

And then he looks Peter in the eye and asks the question, "Simon, do you love me?"

Three times, "*Do you love me?*"

It seems important that Jesus does not use the nickname he had given when they began their relationship. It's not *Peter – Rock – Rocky*. It's *Simon bar Jonah – Simon son of John*. This is formal. This is different. Maybe Peter sees this as a distancing because of what he had done. "I'm not the Rock anymore...but at least he's talking to me."

Yes, Lord, you know I love you.

"Feed my Lambs."

Not only is he talking to me, but, he's still including me.

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Why is he asking me again? Does he not believe me?

Yes, Lord, you know I love you.

"Tend my sheep."

"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

What is this? He has always known my innermost thoughts. Why does he keep asking?

Lord, you know me, you know everything...you know that I love you.

"Feed my sheep."

Folks who study these things have always thought this is a reversal of the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. Three times he said he didn't know him; three times he is required to affirm his love for him. And that's most likely true. It makes sense. But it seems to me there is more to this story than that. Sure, it is an act of grace on Jesus' part to come to Peter, to restore him after Peter let him down so badly when his loyalty was most needed. It is an act of grace to reaffirm that Peter is still his man, still the rock on which his church would be founded.

But, if we walk out of here this morning thinking about how gracious Jesus was to Peter, we will be walking out without seeing how this question is directed toward us. Because, in a very true and very real sense, all of the questions Jesus asks of those around him during his ministry, he also asks of you and me as we follow him, learn from him, try to live for him. How often do those first questions convict us?

"Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"

"Why did you doubt?"

"Do you still not understand?"

"How much longer must I put up with you?"

These are all questions we must admit are well-deserved, for we fear, doubt, fail to understand, are those of little faith.

"Who do people say that I am? And you, who do you say that I am?" At some point in our lives, we have to answer those two questions. We can seek and question and search, but, eventually, Jesus asks us those questions. How do you answer them?

What do you want me to do for you? Is one of my favorite of Jesus' questions. I have a long list of things I want Jesus to do for me, but that question is always paired with the much more difficult, *Do you believe I am able to do this?*

When our faith begins to move beyond what we want Jesus to do for us, eventually the question he asked Martha becomes the question he asks us, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. *Do you believe this?"*

There are those times when he asks, *Could you not stay awake with me?* And, *Would you betray me with a kiss?*

But the most important question Jesus asks each one of us is the question he asks Peter this morning: *Do you love me?* In fact, *Do you love me more than these?*

More important than, *what do you want me to do for you?*

More central than, *who do you say that I am?*

More crucial than, *do you believe I am the resurrection and the life?*

Most vital of all, *do you love me...more than anyone else, do you love me more than anything else...do you love me.*

Jesus doesn't just want to do things for us. And he doesn't just want us to make a statement of belief that is all wrapped up in the brain. He wants us to *love him*. He wants your mind and he wants your heart. He wants your whole being. He wants you and me to look inside ourselves and truly answer the question – because he already knows the answer. Peter is right, Jesus knows all things. This is not a question he needs the answer to; it is a question we need the answer to.

Do you love me more than these?

It is the most important question you and I must answer. Believing is important; trusting is important; following is important; but loving him is most important of all.

Do you love me more than your family?

Do you love me more than your friends?

Do you love me more than your job, or your paycheck, or your pension plan?

Do you love me more than the college you want to get into, or the promotion you're shooting for?

Am I your greatest passion...the thing that matters most?

I've got work for you to do; lambs that need tended; sheep that need fed. But before you start working for me, I need to know...*you* need to know...

Do you love me?