

A PERSONAL QUESTION FROM THE RISEN LORD

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Today I felt drawn and warmed to this text in the scripture – John 21:15-22. “When they had finished eating Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John do you truly love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said. ‘You know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Again Jesus said, ‘Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’ The third time he said to him, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time do you love me. He said, ‘Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted. But when you are old you will stretch out your hands and someone else will dress you and led you where you do not want to go.’ Jesus said this to him to indicate the kind of death which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said ‘Lord, who is going to betray you?’ When Peter saw him he asked, ‘Lord, what about him?’ Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return what is that to you? You must follow me.’”

In Washington D.C. there’s a building called the National Archives. Inside are housed the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights, heavily guarded and in glass. As I looked at those documents I realized that all of our society, the political and social nature of America, is governed by what those pieces of paper have said. On the outside of the building it says The National Archives and has this word attached “The written word endures.”

I thought how apt that is, not only national, governmental documents but how true it is of this word – the Bible. The written word endures. It is because we have this written word that this morning we’re able to confront this most profound question which the Lord I believe not only asked Peter. But a question he asks us. When you come to the enduring word of Jesus in the scripture you find so many times he is asking questions. When the disciples first began following him he asked them this question: “What do you want?” In the middle of their experience with him he asked them “Who do you say that I am?” And now as he is close to terminating his earthly relationship with them he asks Peter this very profound question, “Do you love me?”

It’s a question that Jesus does not ask the group as a whole. In fact, it would almost seem sacrilegious to ask the group as a whole. For it is an individual and personal question which penetrates us. It’s a question which has come to me over and over these last few days as the Lord has born this message in my heart – Do you love me?

If we have the right answer to that question it solves everything else. If we don’t have the right answer then we don’t really have anything at all. The gospel comes down to the basic matter of love. The Lord loves us and then he asks us for our response.

There are three ways I want to look at the text this morning. One way I want to look at the text is to notice the timing of the question. There are four facets to that timing.

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The first that we ought to note is when Jesus asked it of Peter, Do you love me? That question was asked after failure in Peter's life. It is only days before that Peter had three times denied the Lord and had gone out into the darkness of the night weeping bitterly.

Failure causes to hide. Failure causes us to weep and to seek the darkness of the night. When we fail the Lord we wonder is there ever a chance for me again? Can I come back into the good graces of the Lord. How like the Lord it is to re-establish contact with us. We don't re-establish contact with him. He re-establishes contact with us. Just like God, walking in the cool of the day in Eden, sought out Adam and Eve, who were hiding from him in the midst of their sins. So Jesus comes and seeks out this one person who had failed him, and said to him, Do you love me?

I think that's a wonderful thing for those of you, including myself, in this room who have one time or the other failed the Lord. The Lord comes right back to us and says this morning, "I know the failure is there, I know that record is in your background, but that's not what I'm concerned about right now. What I'm concerned about is this question to you: Do you love me?"

The timing of the question is also such that it's following three previous resurrection appearances of the Lord. The Lord according to 1 Corinthians 15 had already privately appeared to Peter. No doubt that was a time of tremendous love expressed. Love received. The Lord, we know had twice appeared to all the disciples. Once to a group of ten and another time to a group of eleven. This encounter on the Lake of Galilee is the fourth time the Lord has appeared to Peter either alone or in a group. Why then is the Lord so long delaying in asking this question? Why doesn't it come out in the first encounter? Or the second or the third?

We may not know all the reasons for that but this we know. Peter's failure had been public and his restoration would be public. If his failure had been private his restoration would have been private. But his failure was public. His denial was thrice repeated to a throng. The Lord will now let him repeat his love three times and thereby restore him.

I have at times looked at people in Christian service who had a severe failure in their life of some kind that has been publicly known – even moral failure – and they have sought to return and come back to the Lord. They have acquitted themselves in terms of repentance and coming back to the Lord. But I have always had this kind of reservation within me: can they ever be trusted again? The Lord has forgiven them but can they be trusted again?

The Lord has so sharply shown me through this scripture my own hypocrisy as if that were my judgment to make. Whom the Lord restores is restored. No questions asked about what happened in the past. Peter doesn't wear those three denials like a dead albatross around his neck for the rest of his life. When Jesus says, Do you love me, and Peter three times says yes that's the end of the failure. That's the last time you hear of it. It's washed away by this question, Do you love me?

This asking of the question, too, follows what I would call a parable miracle. The Lord has appeared to the disciples. They're out at the lake. They had fished all night and had caught nothing. Jesus says, Did you get any fish? They say no and he says, "Throw your nets on the other side." They throw it in and they catch of fish that nearly breaks the net.

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John goes on to detail the catch. He says there are 153 fish. This is a unique sort of detail not found in other miracles. There may be a reason for John noting that 153 because it was somewhat common expectation at that time that there were 153 species of fish in the sea.

It's like that miracle is Jesus' way of saying, Soon on the day of Pentecost and from then on you're going to be throwing a net into the sea of humanity and I want you to know the catch is going to be very large. And it's going to be a catch which embraces everybody of every race, tongue, creed, color, background, male, female, child, old person. They're all going to be in the net. A parabolic miracle. The Lord knowing that the catch is coming wants Peter to be involved. But before Peter can be involved in that caring for the catch the Lord has one basic question to ask him. Do you love me?

When a fisherman catches fish he brings fish in a state of life into death. But when Jesus makes us fishers of people, he brings people from a state of death into life. And since they're in a state of life they'll need a shepherd. So the Lord doesn't say to Peter, Can you preach well? Are you a good administrator? It's Peter, do you love me and if you love me then I can give you responsibility.

So the catch is a parable of what's coming in the growth of the kingdom.

Also this question follows breakfast. How good of the Lord to let us eat before he puts to us these personal questions. Chapter 21:7-8. Peter perceives it is the Lord. He has been stripped for work. When he finds it's the Lord he puts *on* his clothes and then jumps into the sea. Exactly backwards. He comes to Jesus. He has let go of the bulging net, risking the loss of the whole catch because he wants to get to Jesus. In that moment he's expressing tremendous enthusiasm for the Lord.

But the Lord doesn't put the question to him in that spontaneous demonstration of enthusiasm. Instead the Lord waits. Things kind of settle down. There's breakfast to cook. After breakfast there has been that time for the enthusiasm to ebb a little bit out of his system.

One writer has said, "Jesus lets Peter breakfast first. He lets him settle before he puts his question because it matters little what we say or do in a moment of excitement. The question is what is our deliberate choice and preference when we are self possessed and cool. When the whole man within us is in equilibrium, not violently pulled one way or another. When we feel as sometimes we do that we are seeing ourselves as we actually are. Do we then recognize that Christ is more to us than any gain, success, pleasure the world could offer?"

When we're cooling. When we're not under the impression of some real emotional passion. Even when we're outside the sanctuary walls and Jesus puts that question to us, Do you love me? He wants our response not just from our emotion but from our will.

The Lord is the master timer of the question.

Let's look at the content of the question itself. The question "Do you love me?" Persons who minister on this text have tried at various times to show a play on words which is going on in the text between the Greek words for love in John 21. *Agape* is that kind of love, which is totally of grace. It's undeserved. It's high. It's lofty. It does not depend upon the responsiveness of someone else. *Phileo* kind of love is brotherly love. It's more earthly. More impassioned.

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Reciprocal in its nature. There's give and take to it. So the question goes something like this in John. Jesus asks Peter, Peter do you *agape* me? Peter says, yes Lord you know I *phileo* you." Again Jesus says, "Peter, do you *agape* me?" And again Peter says, "Lord, you know I *phileo* you." Jesus then changes words the third time and says "Peter, do you *phileo* me?" And then Peter responds, "Lord, I *phileo* you."

There are those who say, What happened? The Lord is asking Peter for a lofty kind of love and Peter recognizes it and substitutes a lesser form of love. A more earthy kind of love. And say Lord I can never love you to that extent but I can love you to this extent. So finally the third time around the Lord condescends to Peter's love and says, ok Peter do you love me then *phileo*?

That could be the right interpretation. I'm not going to get bogged down in this, this morning. But perhaps a little knowledge of Greek can be dangerous.

The conversation was in Aramaic. The first two centuries of the church no one understood the passage in that term. There have been modern interpreters that said Peter used the higher term because it's more emotional. Peter was saying, Lord I not only love you in this high ethereal sense but I have gutsy love for you. The Lord finally then comes *up* to Peter's level. So it's debatable what the text means.

It seems that John uses these two words in the gospel of John, they are used frequently as synonyms. Maybe we do wrong here in this passage if we try to force them. The fact that John specifically says "The third time Jesus asked him." If the Lord would change the context of the question it seems like he would use that – the third time – meaning I've asked the same questions twice before. Peter also says yes each time. Do you *agape* me? Yes, I *phileo* you. The answer is yes each time.

I'm not going to get caught up in this. I'm not so much interested in debating the words. But the question to me is simply this question: do you love me? Three times Peter says yes that he does. Also he relies upon the Lord's knowledge of his love. He says, Lord, you know. The Lord asks him the first time, "Do you love me more than these?" Probably the meaning is his boats, his income, his whole manner of life. Do you love me more than *these*? And Peter's saying yes Lord, I do. Peter's saying to the Lord, You bring me more satisfaction than the earthly security I have around me. Yes. You know that I love you.

How did the Lord know that Peter loved him? That's striking. He had denied the Lord three times. He had had no opportunity to prove himself. In fact Peter it seems from the gospels had gotten a little bit impatient that Jesus wasn't making frequent enough resurrection appearances so it says that Peter said in John 21, "I'm going fishing." No use hanging around with nothing to do waiting for him to show up. I'm going fishing.

On what concrete observable data could Peter rely upon to say to the Lord, "Lord, you know." I don't think there was concrete observable data in Peter's life. I think what Peter knew and what every believer who comes to know Jesus knows is that there is something so innate in Jesus that when you are in his presence you innately recognize he loves you and you appeal to that. "Lord, you know I love you." Peter with all of his conduct couldn't justify that kind of statement. Nevertheless he knew that the Lord knew in the inner recesses of his heart just like the Lord knows the inner recesses of our heart and we can say that with the same confidence: "Lord, you know I love you."

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No way Peter could prove that statement in terms of empirical data. But he appealed to the Lord to know.

It's striking the questions the Lord does not ask Peter. He does not ask him any questions about the past: "Peter, what about your works... Are you worth loving? There's no question about the future. "Will you guarantee me you will not make the same mistake again? Do you guarantee me you'll never deny me again? Will you guarantee you'll never fail again?" No promises. "Right now, where you're at: do you love me?" Peter says yes three times. "Lord, you know. You know all things." He was hurt that the Lord would ask it three times but it's the Lord's way of publicly restoring him after a three fold denial.

When Peter has answered yes for the last time the Lord, each time the Lord gives him a task and then after answering yes for the third time the Lord gives him a cross. He says first, feed my lambs, then tend my sheep, then feed my sheep.

What does the Lord have in mind? Back to the catch of fish. The large group of people coming into the kingdom of God. What's the preeminent qualification caring for those people? Love toward Jesus. That's the question Jesus is concerned about. He knows that if Peter loves him then he can entrust the people coming into his kingdom to a good hearted shepherd.

That's the question the Lord puts to us. When we respond from our heart to the question, Do you love me? The Lord then says, ok. I want you to look at the family members, the people that you live with that you work with, that you are around. I want you to realize that in loving me part of your responsibility is to care, to feed the lambs. Some of you have little lambs in your house in the spiritual sense. Not a whole lot of doctrine you can teach them now. About the only thing you can do is feed them.

I realize here Jesus is speaking in a spiritual sense more than a physical sense. But there is a way in which God is calling us to care for one another when we know from our heart that we love him.

Then the Lord gives Peter a cross. He says in verse 18 "I tell you the truth that when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted." Peter is a young man at this point and this description fits him. By young I mean he's somewhere in his 30s. The Lord is saying a positive thing to young people here. He anticipates that Peter is going to have the opportunity to get old. When you were young... when you are old. When you are young two marvelous things about youth – you can dress yourself and you can go where you want. This obviously only applies to you if you are young and over 18 years of age. Anybody here with family knows anybody under 18 cannot go where they want or wear what they want. But what a wonderful thing when you reach 18 – gird yourself and go where you want.

What a fantastic thing at that stage in life. But Peter is not simply going where he wants. But going where he ought. Which is to follow after Jesus. He dressed himself and he went where he wanted. And where does the next verse say he went? He went with Jesus. He was walking down the road with Jesus and he turned and looked and saw John. The Lord says "When you're young you gird yourself and go where you want. But when you are old another will stretch out your arms, another will gird you. You will go where you do not want to go."

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John says, hereby Jesus prophesied about Peter's death. What's the significance of it? Peter, the end result of your loving me is not what the earth views as a good end. But the end results are of you following me will be following me to the cross. And giving yourself for me. Jesus does not appeal to us from the standpoint of a materialistic sense. Nobody in his right mind would want to follow a leader whose eventual promise to him was that kind of an end. Unless that person had risen from the dead and you knew that that kind of death couldn't lay a finger on you.

Peter is given the responsibility and the charge and the acknowledgement of the Lord that following me is a cross. Peter then looks around and sees the disciple whom the Lord hadn't had to ask the question, Do you love me? And he says, What about this person? The Lord gives him this great response because we're so interested in what somebody else is going to do. Doesn't everybody get a fair shake in the kingdom? No. "I think the Lord ought to treat everybody alike. What happens to me ought to be what happens to everybody else." The Lord doesn't quite see it that way. He says, directed to Peter, "If I will him to remain alive until I return what is that to you?" If you ever want a verse that can point to the fact that the Lord God has sovereign control of your life and even your death, here is the verse. Our lives are in his hands. If I will, what is that to you? Follow me.

Following the Lord regardless of what somebody else does or doesn't do. What is that to you? Follow me.

How many times in my own life wrestling with insecurity of works and all these kind of things have I privately wondered, Lord, do you really love me? Can you love me given who I am? And the failure that I am? Do you love me?

It's striking in scripture you never find that question. You never find anyone asking Jesus, Do you love me? When you're around Jesus you don't have to ask that question. It's an automatic given. He loves you. You don't have to ask it when you are in his presence. He loves you. The only question that's appropriate is him to us, Do you love me?

What a tremendous security that is to recognize I don't have to wonder whether or not the Lord loves me. Of course he loves me. Of course he loves you. Does he loves you when you have failed him? Of course he does. Does he love you when you have succeeded? Of course he does. You're his child. I am his child. The question is, Do you love me?

In a very personal way you come to us as you did to Peter. It's as though we're back on the Lake of Galilee and we're standing on the seashore. The breakfast fire is dying down and the cooking utensils have been put away. There in that early morning sunlight we've been standing there listening. In our mind we visualize that we're there on the side, listening as you talk with Peter. Now Peter has been asked and he's given his response. And it's as though we're next. We're standing there right before you. You're saying to us, as you did to Peter, Do you love me? Thank you, Lord, for the questions you don't ask us. Thank you for the question that you do. We respond in our heart today, not in some braggadocio way. We respond not in an unconfident way. We respond as did Peter with a measure of certainty, caution and conditioned by your knowledge. Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. You know, Lord. You know. Thank you, Lord, that you know even in times that I don't know you know that I love you. For every person who has come here today in their Christian experience or their non-Christian walk and have wondered what question you would put to them. What response they would give. Where they stood in relationship to

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you. After all is said and done and given all their back history, if they had any possibility of being in fellowship with you after all they'd done. You come and you restore us to fellowship. Just the affirmation of our love is enough. All the past is gone. We're called to walk in your footsteps and go on with discipleship and to go on with life. Sealed and made secure. This moment of interaction with you. You love us. We love you. As we share this bread and cup may there be a real time now of just coming together in our hearts in communion with you, worshipping you and telling you our love for you. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.