

SERMON: Do You Love Me?

TEXT: John 21:1-19

One of my favorite musicals of all time is *Fiddler on the Roof*. It offers the perfect mixture of humor and tragedy, love and hate, hope and struggle, tradition and change. And it's all tied together with an amazing musical score.

One of the less popular – or at least, lesser-known – songs in the musical is called, *Do You Love Me?* Tevye and Golde are a Jewish couple living in pre-revolutionary Russia and struggling with changing traditions and growing anti-Semitism. Two of their five daughters have rebelled against tradition and chosen to marry someone they love rather than being betrothed to someone chosen for them by the local matchmaker. As their parents try to come to terms with this unfamiliar concept of marrying for love, Tevye asks his wife, “Do you love me?”

Golde calls him a fool, accuses him of having indigestion, and tells him to go lie down. But Tevye reminds her of the day they met: their wedding day. He says he was nervous, but his parents assured him they would grow to love one another. So, he wants to know, “Do you love me?” Golde reviews all that she has done for him over the 25 years they've been married: washed his clothes, cooked his meals, cleaned his house, given him children, milked the cow. “After 25

years,” she argues, “why talk about love right now?” Tevye is the romantic one in this relationship. He wants to know how she *feels*. “Do you love me?” His persistence now has Golde wondering the same thing. “Do I love him? For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him, fought him, starved with him, twenty-five years my bed is his, if that’s not love, what is?” Tevye triumphantly accuses her, “Then you love me!” Finally, she relents, however unromantically, “I suppose I do.” And Tevye, in turn, confesses, “And I suppose I love you, too.”

I was reminded of this song when I read about how the risen Jesus put the same question before Peter, three times. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? Simon, son of John, do you love me? Do you love me?”

When not set to music, it gets annoying pretty quickly, like a toddler trying to get your attention. Momma, momma, momma!

In fact, Peter does show some aggravation, and John writes that he felt hurt because Jesus kept asking. “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

But for Jesus, the words are not enough. Every time Peter answers, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you,” Jesus responds with a command: “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” Jesus wants Peter to live out his words, to show that they really mean something, to turn words and feelings into actions. “if you really love me, you will feed my sheep.”

Of course, this idea of putting requirements on love can be misused and can make for very dangerous relationships. “If you really love me, you won’t turn me in for breaking the law.” “If you really love me, you will go into debt to buy me something you can’t afford.” “If you really love me, you will turn your back on your family members, you will quit your job, you will lose weight, you will give up your friends.” These are examples of an abusive relationship.

But that’s *not* how love works. Jesus wants Peter – and all others who would follow him – to care for others. Feed the hungry. Tend to the sick. Provide shelter and clothing for those who are without. However, Jesus never meant for us to neglect our own needs while serving others.

I met a woman the other day who was very much down on her luck. Her husband had left her; she had lost her job and her home and had been staying in a

motel. But she was afraid they would also kick her out because she was behind on her payment for the room. I heard from someone else who knew this woman, that she was the most generous, giving person, and was always doing for others without asking for anything in return. She believed that God called her to do this. Without complaining about her own situation.

As another pastor and I tried to help her, she was terribly embarrassed and did not want to accept any help. It took a lot of talking to convince her that it was her turn to receive. She deserved help now just as much as those she had helped in the past.

Jesus questioned Peter more than once. Because one answer is not enough. After tragedy we are often reminded to tell our loved ones how we feel. You never know when the last time you speak to someone will be the last time you ever speak to them. On the other side of the coin, however, is the habitual “I love you.” When the words just come out, without any thought or feeling behind them. When the words have lost all meaning. When the words are empty.

Peter was always the impulsive one. Peter often spoke and acted without thinking. He was naked when he and the others pulled closer to shore after fishing

all night, and when he heard that it was Jesus who told them to put the net out again, he put on his clothes, then jumped in the water to get to Jesus as fast as he could.

So, maybe Jesus was asking the same question repeatedly to give Peter a chance to think carefully about his answer. Peter. DO. YOU. LOVE. ME?

Three times Jesus asked. Do you remember something else that happened three times involving Peter? He denied knowing Jesus. Three times. He couldn't blame that on his impulsive nature. He might try to blame it on the power of fear. But he turned his back on his friend, his Lord, his Messiah. Imagine having to live with that for the rest of your life.

The risen Jesus made sure Peter didn't have to live with those last words of denial. The risen Jesus allowed Peter to redeem himself, proclaiming his love as many times as he voiced his denial. Repentance in the simplest, truest form.

Of course, Jesus asks the same question of each one of us. DO YOU LOVE ME? We Presbyterians tend to express our faith in more intellectual ways, and we get uncomfortable with more emotional statements. So, a question such as this

may be a bit beyond our comfort zone. Oh, we can answer “yes” easily enough. And we are confident when we say we believe in Jesus, we trust Jesus, we are grateful to Jesus, we will follow Jesus. But to say the words, *Jesus, I love you*, might not come so easily.

And, of course, we would much rather act out our faith than have to talk about it at all – any day of the week and twice on Sunday! We love our neighbor as ourselves, of course! But before any of that comes love of the Lord our God.

One of the best things about this story to me is that the risen Jesus invites his friends to have breakfast. I love breakfast. Especially when someone else has cooked it! It’s comfort food to me. You get to eat it when you’re still in your pj’s. It feels very ordinary and very homey. And it takes place before you’ve had a chance to become tense over the stresses of the day.

The disciples have been fishing all night. They are physically exhausted from the lack of sleep and the hard labor. And they still have all that emotional exhaustion from the events of the last days and weeks. Then Jesus says, “Come and have breakfast.” And all their exhaustion just melts away.

It's the most important meal of the day, you know. It's the way to get started on the right foot. And I think this story can be a good reminder for us to start every day saying, "I love you, Lord. I love you, Jesus. I love you, Holy Spirit. Tell me how I can show my love for you today. Guide my footsteps to feed your lambs. Speak through my words to tend your sheep. Work through my actions to feed your sheep."

Feed us, Lord, so that we may feed others, to the glory of the risen Christ.

AMEN.