***DO YOU LOVE ME?***

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March 14, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 40:10-11 and John 21:15-19

Almost fifty years ago *Fiddler on the Roof* made its debut in movie theaters across the country. As you may recall it is the story of a family of Jewish peasants eking out a living under the rule of the Russian tsar at the turn of the 20th century. Central in their lives were the law of God and tradition which offered balance and stability to their days. Without tradition their existence would be as precarious as a fiddler on the roof, says the peasant farmer Tevye. Yet they find tradition threatened by their daughters. The tradition was for marriages to be arranged, but Tevye and his wife Golde are confronted by daughters who want to marry for love. In one memorable scene, Tevye tells Golde that he has granted permission for their daughter Hodel to marry the man of her choosing. “*Hodel loves him*,” Tevye says. “*What can we do? It’s a new world*.” And then reflecting on his own marriage he asks Golde, “*Do you love me?*” It seems an odd question for a husband to ask a wife after twenty-five years of marriage, but perhaps not so odd for spouses whose marriage was arranged by someone else. For the first time Tevye dares to ask his wife, “*Do you love me?*”

That exchange came to mind as I read the question posed by the risen Christ to Peter as they stood by the Sea of Galilee. After three years together walking across Galilee, after days and nights in ministry together, after the crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus still asks Peter three times: “*Simon son of John, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?*” It is a question asked of a disciple who had denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest: *I do not know the man. I do not know him. I do not know him.* And then the cock crowed. It is a personal question posed by Jesus to Simon Peter son of John, but it might be asked of you or me: John son of John, Chris son of Steve, Sarah daughter of Ann, Jeff son of Richard – Do you love me? You sing sweetly of Jesus’ love for you from birth: *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.* You affirm it three times: *Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.* But do you love the Jesus who loves you? That is the question posed to Peter and to us. Before you jump to answer, you might want to consider Peter’s response.

It had been a long night for Peter. With six of his fellow disciples, he had returned to the sea from which Jesus had called him and that familiar life he knew so well. The gentle lapping of waves on the boat, the damp morning air, and the weariness from a night on the water were old friends revisited after three years on land. The fishing proved fishless – not a fish to be found – but Peter knew some nights were like that, although I wonder: Did he recall such nights on the sea or did he fear that he had lost his touch at the nets? John doesn’t say. He doesn’t even tell us whether this was a brief respite for Peter from the turmoil of crucifixion and resurrection or a return to his chosen vocation as fisherman after three years away. John says only that Peter and six other disciples went fishing and there the risen Lord found them.

That is the way it usually happens – we don’t find the Lord; the Lord finds us. In the midst of ordinary times doing ordinary things God finds us. The risen Lord appears to men walking home along the Emmaus Road and to Paul as he travels on the road to Damascus. Moses is tending sheep when he sees a bush that burns but is not consumed and suddenly finds he is standing on holy ground with God. John Wesley finds his heart strangely warmed in an Aldersgate Street prayer meeting. Martin Luther despairs until one day in reading Paul’s letter to the Romans he discovers grace. I was sitting at a stoplight on the way to a church league basketball game when the decision to go to seminary became clear. In the ordinary things of life, in ordinary times, we encounter God in extraordinary or sometimes ordinary ways.

You are as apt to encounter God at work as at worship, in school as in prayer, in the bustle of the hospital as in the quiet of your garden. God is not confined to holy places or to holy times; God makes holy the places where God goes and the times in which God goes there. That is not to say that you should not pray or read the Bible or worship here on Sunday morning when you can, but do not think that it is here alone that God comes to you, and do not be surprised when God appears at an unexpected time in an unexpected place in your life.

That was the experience of the disciples when Jesus called them away from their nets to follow him, and it was their experience again after the resurrection when Jesus found them fishing at dawn’s early light and suggested they toss their nets on the other side of the boat. They did not recognize that it was Jesus until they found their nets full, but there he was at an ordinary time in an ordinary place while they were busy with ordinary tasks. There he was – filling their empty nets, feeding them with fish and bread as he had fed the five thousand by that same sea, calling them back from their boats to follow him once again, and then, only then, asking: *Simon son of John, do you love me?*

Actually, Jesus’ first question to Peter is: *Do you love me* ***more than these****?* The question is a little ambiguous. Is Jesus asking: *do you love me more than these other disciples love me?* Or is he asking: *do you love me more than you love these disciples?* Or is he asking: *do you love me more than all these things – the fish and the fishing and the sea and the life you know so well?* The text says only “*more than these”*, and perhaps it is intentionally ambiguous, intended to include all of the above, to ask where Jesus falls in Peter’s list of loves. The same might be asked of us, not only: do you love me more than you love other people but also more than you love all the other things in your life, more than you can conceive of anyone loving anyone else? If so, then it embraces the first half of that Great Commandment: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength – with all that you are. Perhaps in that light, Jesus is asking Peter and you and me: *Do you love me as you love the Lord your God?*

“*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you!*” That was Peter’s response each time the question is asked of him, though the word he uses for *love* is one meaning brotherly love, not extraordinary love. Surely Jesus knew that Peter loved him, for Peter had been the first to leap from the boat and come to shore to meet him that day. It was Peter who had cut off the ear of the soldier to protect Jesus on the night of his arrest. It was Peter who had followed Jesus to Pilate’s court. It was Peter who had left his nets and his family to follow Jesus for three years. If that wasn’t love, what was? Yet, it was also Peter who denied Jesus three times, Peter who refused to let Jesus wash his feet, Peter who fell asleep when Jesus was in prayer on the night of his arrest, Peter who led the return to the safe harbor of the sea following the resurrection. “You know that I love you,” said Peter. But how was Jesus to know that Peter loved him? How would Jesus know that ***you*** love him, if you love him?

“Do you love me?” asks Tevye of his wife.

She replies: *For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes*

*Cooked your meals, cleaned your house*

*Given you children, milked the cow*

*After twenty-five years why talk about love right now?*

To which Tevye responds:

*My father and my mother said we’d learn to love each other, and now I’m asking, “Golde, do you love me?”*

“*I’m your wife*,” she replies.

“*I know*,” he says. “*But do you love me?*”

And so Golde muses:

*For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him,*

*Fought with him, starved with him*

*Twenty-five years my bed is his. If that’s not love, what is?*

“*Then you love me!*” exclaims Tevye.

“*I suppose I do*,” she sighs.[[1]](#endnote-1)

“*Simon son of John, do you love me?”*

“*Lord, you know that I love you.”*

“*Then feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep… Follow me.*”

It is in acts of love that we show our love – for a spouse, for a friend, for the risen Christ. *Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so*, but what the Bible tells me is the ways in which Jesus loves me through his life, death and resurrection. The God who loved us so much as to come among us and be crucified and rise again asks us to love one another with a love which is as tangible, as real, as that love God has shown for us, love as tangible as the love Golde showed Tevye. It is love incarnate in Christ but incarnate also in hands that feed the hungry and clothe the naked and embrace those who mourn. It is love that is shared day to day, person to person across a lifetime. The answer to Christ’s question is not a spoken word – Peter tried that approach: “*Lord, you know that I love you.*” The answer to Christ’s question is a word enacted. *Do you love me?* is best answered, not with our lips, but with faithful lives. It is answered by feeding the hungry and comforting those who mourn, in putting together Blessing Bags for the homeless and gathering food and toiletry items for Shelburne students, in sending a card or making a call to those who are sick, in wearing a mask and getting a vaccine, in loving one another day in and day out in tangible ways.

The answer to Christ’s question lies not in what you say, but in what you do, in how you live and whether you follow where the risen Christ leads you. When Jesus called the disciples he said, “*Follow me*.” And they did – both literally and figuratively. But after he was crucified and risen, they did not know what to do or how to follow anymore. How do you follow a *risen* Lord who is not always there in front of you to be seen? There at the side of the Sea of Galilee Jesus made clear what they were to do. How do you follow him? How do you love the risen Christ?

*Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. That is how you follow,* says Jesus. *That is how I will know that you do indeed love me.* Amen

1. www.lyricsondemand.com [↑](#endnote-ref-1)