

Questions Jesus Asked: Do you love me?

Sunday, September 13, 2015

John 21:1-17 CEB

Marysville UMC

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Bring Your Own Bible series begins today! We're calling it Questions Jesus Asked. Jesus asked a lot of questions. The four gospels recorded 173 of them. He didn't usually ask them for his own sake, he seemed to know what was going on. But he asked them for people who were too afraid or unaware to ask themselves. I'm thankful we worship a God who gently invites us to keep asking questions. We will never and shouldn't ever have it all figured out. We are a people of grace and lifelong growth that we call sanctification. Questions are very good.

Background Notes

All the resurrection appearances of Jesus have a mysterious quality to them. They are scenes of mystical encounter, usually in tranquil settings, yet with the "electricity" of cosmic transformation just beneath the surface (John Petty).

We're not entirely sure who wrote the book of John. It's very different from the three other gospels, Matthew, Mark & Luke. John differs significantly from the synoptic gospels in theme, content, time duration, order of events, and style.

The specific story we're looking at today happened at the Sea of Galilee, also referred to as the Sea of Tiberius. Jesus stories by the water are wonderful. There's something about water that's holy, ordinary and powerful for humanity.

At this point in John, Jesus has already died, experienced resurrection and is now appearing to the disciples and others in a variety of situations. This story is another illustration of how tough it was for people to realize Jesus' identity. Our text today was Jesus' last recorded resurrection appearance.

(1) Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: (2) Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two other disciples were together. (3) Simon Peter told them, "I'm going fishing." They said, "We'll go with you." They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing.

The disciples have seen the resurrected Jesus and what do they do? They go fishing. It's what they know. They're fishermen. It's safe and comfortable. Don't we do the same thing? Experience something extraordinary but have no idea what to do with this new awareness. So we go back to what we know. And we come up empty.

(4) Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't realize it was Jesus. (5) Jesus called to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." (6) He said, "Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn't haul in the net. (7) Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water. (8) The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren't far from shore, only about one hundred yards.

The "right hand" of God is a sign of God's power (Is 62:8). The exhortation to throw the nets on the "right part" of the boat is a way of saying that life is created, sustained, and made abundant by God's power, not our own (Perry). There have likely been times in your life when you hit the wall and finally admitted, "this isn't working." That is the very moment we're able to open up to God in a real way and allow the Holy Spirit to get a chance at our hearts.

(9) When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. (10) Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you’ve just caught.” (11) Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn’t torn, even with so many fish.

The last time we saw a fire like this was in John 18:18 and Simon Peter was warming his hands as he denied Jesus three times. Now he stands around a fire with Jesus answering three questions. Even after Peter’s evidence of not quite getting it, Jesus calls him to the central task of discipleship.

Why 153 fish? Scholars don’t know. It’s a mystery. They’ve done lots of Bible math and can’t figure out if there’s a significance to Peter pulling in 153 fish. It seems to be saying, there is great abundance and diversity in the body of Christ. Lots of different fish. And some scholars believe the fact that the net wasn’t torn is a sign of unity. Even with all those different fish, they stuck together.

(12) Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. (13) Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. (14) This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus offered them breakfast and no one moved. So Jesus comes to them. And gives bread first. What an example for our lives today. In our relationships with others, we’re invited not to sit back and wait for love to come our way - we’re encouraged to move towards others with our love. And to give bread and fish...sounds a little like communion to me. I love that Jesus gave them bread before fish. Almost as if to say, “I am the bread of life. I’m all you’ll ever need. You’re so focused on fish that you’re missing it.”

(15) When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Simon replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” (16) Jesus asked a second time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Simon replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Take care of my sheep.” (17) He asked a third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, “Do you love me?” He replied, “Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.

What might God be saying to us through this scripture?

I think the answer might be, “feed my sheep.” Just taking a guess here! Sometimes we don’t get what Jesus really means, but it’s hard to argue with his full intent in this story. When it’s hard...feed my sheep. When it takes effort...feed my sheep. When you don’t know what to do...feed my sheep.

My next question after this story is usually, “**so which sheep do we feed?**” In our American culture, we’re obsessed with progress and achievement. When my ego hears this story, it wants to feed ALL the sheep! Let’s care for more and more of them!” But no, that’s our cultural values speaking, not Jesus Christ.

Jesus prepares a feast for us of bread and wine and grace and fish. Invites us to receive that in every corner of our lives. Then says, “Feed my sheep.”

Today, I’m going to help us focus in on one group of people I’ve been hearing a lot about at Marysville UMC. And in light of our story for today, the question sounds something like this: **What does it mean to feed the youngest sheep among us in today’s world?**

From my first conversation with our district superintendent to small gatherings in your homes to administrative meetings to staff meetings, I’ve heard one thing very consistently: “We love kids. We want them to know God. We want them to feel comfortable here. Maybe they even have something to teach us.”

And I’m still listening to hear if you’re really serious about this. Because, if 200 people got together and said we want to make a difference in the lives of children in our community, that’s a church with a great vision. That’s feeding sheep, big time.

But we all know it's not as simple as writing a vision statement and watching the kingdom of God become a reality in the life of every child in Marysville. I wish it was that easy.

Some may wonder if all it really takes is getting a young pastor. And yes, that can help. When a family with young kids comes to a church with young people in leadership, it communicates they are welcome, they're valued and they can relate to each other a little easier. But no pastor should shoulder those kinds of expectations on their own. It's not healthy. This is how pastors burn out.

What also makes caring for children tough is the world we now live in. The familiar models of discipleship that worked like clockwork a generation or two ago are struggling to click nowadays. Most churches are experiencing this when it comes to Sunday School, youth group and Sunday worship services. Has the world around these children really changed so much? It has.

Changes in technology have changed just about everything in our lives. Can you remember a time before the internet? College freshman today can't. The abundance of technological gadgets in our lives have changed how kids and teens learn, play and interact. Think of all the information we have access to now. It's both a fun and terrifying time to be a parent. A recent Boston Globe article asked, "When did parents get so scared?" They point to the media's fascination with everything from child abductions to constant product recalls.

Information overload leads to an overwhelming number of choices. You likely have experienced this when choosing a cereal or toothpaste or what to watch on TV. The New York Times had a popular article, "Too Many Choices: A Problem that Can Paralyze." When we have so many choices, we're overwhelmed and find it hard to choose something and move forward. On the popular Humans of New York Facebook community, a 24-year-old describes it well: "Choosing what I want to do with my life is like trying to watch a YouTube video. When I'm halfway through the video, I glance over at the sidebar and see they're recommending something else that seems more interesting."

This describes, in part, how hard it is for kids, teens and young adults to focus and follow through when life is so full of choice and opportunity and information. There's a new phobia called, FOMO, Fear of Missing Out. It's a very real fear that we'll miss something that everyone else knows about. Social media thrives on this.

And we can't forget the ways technological advances are changing human interaction. At the dinner table, at stop lights, with friends.

Every generation has challenges to raising children. It's never been easy and never will be. And when a church takes seriously its call to understand children and youth in **this generation**, learning about the world they live in is necessary to understand the way they experience God and faith and love and forgiveness. May we ask children and youth what it's like in their world. How do you learn? What do you enjoy? How do you know you're loved? Their answers will guide us.

We NEED the church to speak into this generation about things like Sabbath, presence in the moment, loving others, forgiving ourselves, depending on Jesus and the church, using our head and our heart to love God. More than ever! Our Wesleyan theology is perfectly positioned to connect with children and youth in today's world. If we're willing to try new methods - new wineskins - for communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ, the possibilities are endless.

On Friday, 1 year old Wesley and I were playing with Lego's on the floor. We started out working together. I would put a couple together and he would tear them apart. I would put a couple more together and he would tear them apart. He was having a blast. And I was for about a minute. Then I got impatient and started to build a tower. I got pretty focused on making it as tall as I could. He still managed to grab it and all my work came crumbling down.

It reminded me of how easy it is for us adults to leave kids in the dust of our spiritual growth. We get excited about our goals and growth and once we hire a couple staff members to work with our children, it's surprisingly

easy to shift our focus. I admit I've done this. Kids are exhausting. Wonderful, but exhausting. It takes a special church to shift their focus to the youngest sheep among us.

So as a church, we want to try something new with our children and youth this year. We want to bring the youngest sheep among us into the fold of corporate worship. We want to sing together. To pray together. To learn the stories of the Bible together. We want to give them opportunities to serve and make a difference. Will it sometimes be noisy, chaotic and uncomfortable? Yes. Will they sometimes sit in your seat and learn about faith differently than we do? Yes. And it will be beautiful. Because we will be the church **together**.

We are the church. We're more than this building. Every day, in each of our lives, we have an opportunity to feed some sheep. To care for others, of all ages, in unique ways that you're specifically gifted to do. Jesus asked Peter and asks us today, "do you love me? Then feed my sheep."

And I'm talking about some serious agape love. Not this friendship love that Peter thinks is enough. The real deal, big, moment making love that opens someone's eyes to the reality that they are loved just for existing. Because God made them. Agape love sees past outward appearances, our important schedules, our excuses, our laziness or their uncomfortable stories.

So friends, may we be a church who feeds the cute ones, the tired ones, the sick ones, the unpopular ones, the teenage sulking ones. The purple, green and rainbow-colored ones. May God's kingdom come to the youngest among us, to refugee children who think no one notices and to the ones who think they they'll never belong. Let's feed some sheep. Amen.