

“Do You?” • John 21:15 – 19
Sheth LaRue • November 21, 2019
Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary Senior Sermon

In this morning’s text, we meet up with the disciples who have returned to the open waters of the Sea of Galilee. They’ve been out fishing all night and haven’t caught a single thing – it’s turning out to be the worst fishing trip ever. Early in the morning they hear some guy yelling from the shoreline: “Have you caught anything?”

The disciples grumpily reply, “No...” mumbling to one another...

And this...stranger...suggests casting out on the right side of the boat where they’ll find fish. The disciples, having done everything else, do so...and they catch so many fish they can’t haul in the net! It’s one of those lightbulb moments and the disciples immediately recognize the stranger on shore to be Jesus. Peter, impulsive as he is, cries “It’s the Lord!” and leaps overboard to swim to Jesus; the others make their way back with the boat and the fish.

Imagine with me, there on that shore the disciples find Jesus tending a small fire, logs crackling and wisps of smoke rising from it. There are some fish gently cooking on the fire, and there is some bread, which Jesus breaks and offers to them. They gather round – Peter panting and dripping wet – and no one is saying a word...somehow they *want* to ask if this is Jesus, but they also somehow *just know* he is. They all settle in around the fire and eat their morning meal with their friend.

After eating, Jesus turns his attention and speaks directly to Peter, now back to his namesake of Simon, son of John. The informalities of Peter...Cephas...has gone away in this one-on-one conversation. And Jesus is not holding back – he never does. He strikes straight at the heart of the tension between the two of them...he asks: do you love me?

Peter’s mind races as he remembers when he had said that he’d give up his life for Jesus, but then denied ever knowing his master. Peter recalls when he had faith until he got the least bit scared and then sunk like a rock. Peter acknowledges that he had agreed to pray but fell asleep in the attempt. Peter knows he’s supposed to promote peace, but wildly brandished his sword and swung at the closest thing he could strike. Jesus is staring into his soul as Peter remembers the days earlier when he was sitting around a similar campfire as the rooster crowed.

I would like to say that I’m nothing like Peter. I would like to say that I would gladly stand up for my Lord and claim our relationship in an instant. I would like to say that I would

stay up late and pray. I would like to say that I would go wherever I am called and would walk confidently in faith. I am exactly like Peter...we are all like Peter. We are right there with Peter by that fire as Jesus faces us and asks us this personal, vulnerable question. Jesus doesn't hold back, but reaches directly into the heart of the tension we feel in faith, asking us: do you love me?

We want to respond as quickly as Peter does, with a fervent "You know that I love you" but the realities of our denials push back against our speedy response. Because we don't always act like someone in love with all of creation. Do we buy a meal for the elderly woman who wanders our campus... do we acknowledge her...do we even see her? Do we tithe lovingly...are we tithing at all? Are we taking the time to sort our recycling, or do we just shrug our shoulders and hope someone else is doing it? Do we greet strangers as friends...do we greet our friends as friends?

Too often we deny the reality of the costs of our greater economic system and our complicity in it. We deny our responsibility to demand fundamental ecological reorientation. We deny our sisters and brothers - ecosystems and creatures of all kinds - all with claims to our love for them. We deny them and then cower with a hardened heart when Jesus looks us squarely in the eyes and asks: do you love me?ⁱ

Despite our denials, despite our refusals time and again, Jesus has a place for us by that fire...Jesus has a place for us in this kingdom building. By God's grace, Christ sought out Peter to invite him back into the work which he was called to all along. By God's grace, we too are reclaimed and welcomed to that fireside, not only to be asked if we love our Creator, but to be called to tend and feed God's flock. We are called to join in God's redeeming work and to bear witness to the love of God which calls us again and again.

We are called to love twenty-one year old Jolie Fifer, kicked out of her family home when she experienced symptoms of bipolar disorder and now living under I-35.ⁱⁱ We are called to care for the silenced Spanish-speaking women and children in abusive relationships who are too fearful to report the violence for fear of deportation.ⁱⁱⁱ We are called to tend to Spencer Deehring and Tristan Perry, a gay couple targeted and attacked on fourth street this spring for simply holding hands in public.^{iv} We are called to cultivate the countless plants, animals, and life-forms sharing and living on our campus. These - all these creations - are God-in-flesh pleading: do you love me?

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Feed the human – and other-than-human – sheep. Tend to the green pastures and clean waters that nourish them. Feed the hungry, guide the lost, support the weak, comfort the scared, lift up the discouraged. This is our calling, outside of everything else we may do in our lives, this is it – love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all you soul, with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself. Doing this is to love Jesus.

This is not easy work and, just as Christ warned Peter, we, too are warned. We will be led to where we do not wish to go: to that small, run-down church in rural west-Texas. To that dilapidated hospital with over-worked and under-supported chaplains. To that wealthy, suburban parish with overflowing treasuries and empty volunteer slots. The call to feed and tend is truly great, and will lead us in ways we cannot foresee to places we may not wish to go, but the voice of the risen Christ still calls, still feeds, still empowers for the ministry – even us, doubters and deniers.^v

The smoke gently rises and the logs softly crackle. Voices of the other disciples murmur in the background. Our faithful God calls us to our seat around that campfire. Again and again we return to that fire...to the voice of our loving Lord asking us...

Do you love me?

Do you love me?

Do you love me?

ⁱ Lisa E. Dahill, “Pastoral Perspective: John 21:15-19” in *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, Vol. 2, Cynthia A. Jarvis, et al, eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 346.

ⁱⁱ Fatima Espejo, et al., “Homeless in Texas,” *The Texas Tribune*, November 1, 2019.

<https://www.texastribune.org/2019/11/01/homeless-austin-residents-greg-abbott-deadline-talk-life-streets/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Tuma, “Austin Struggles to Adjust as SB 4 Takes Its Toll on Immigrants,” *The Austin Chronicle*, April 5, 2019. <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2019-04-05/austin-struggles-to-adjust-as-sb-4-takes-its-toll-on-immigrants/>

^{iv} Alyssa Goard, “Gay Couple Says They Were Targeted, Attacked in Downtown Austin”, *KXAN.com*, January 21, 2019. <https://www.kxan.com/news/local/austin/gay-couple-says-they-were-targeted-attacked-in-downtown-austin/>

^v Thomas H. Troeger, “Homiletical Perspective: John 21:1-19” in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 425.