

“Do You Love Me?”
John 21:1-19, Psalm 30
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Maybe we all have an “alter-ego,” I’m not sure. Someone who does or says things that we never would, but we wish we could. Or maybe someone that we’ve always wanted to be, that we dreamed of what life would be like to live like that, or to have the talent that they have, or the wealth that she displays. Do you have someone like that? Or maybe just a skill that you’ve always dreamed of having, but just was never in you to have or you never could really put in the effort to perfect it. I love sports and I used to love basketball, but I’m never going to be 6 foot 8” that would allow me to play as I want. I like other sports too, but it is said that it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to become really proficient at something. That’s more hours than there are in an entire year. Not going to happen. But that still doesn’t stop me from wishing. For many years our children were involved in theater, especially musical theater. I love musical theater and have always wished that I could sing well enough to do it myself. I wouldn’t want to do just any musical theater, though. I just wish I could sing well enough to play the part of my real alter-ego, Tevye the milkman in “Fiddler on the Roof.” Somewhere inside me, there is a Tevye struggling to get out. I imagine myself on stage singing “Tradition” or “If I Were a Rich Man.” Tevye really touches me with his struggles to raise his daughters—I know that struggle—and he talks it all out with God, especially as they begin to fall in love and want to be married. Tevye wants to uphold the tradition of arranging suitable matches for his daughters, but one after another they fall in love, without any help from Tevye. After first objecting to all this foolishness of love, Tevye begins to think to himself, but outloud, which is normal for Tevye-- “She loves him. Hmmm. Love.” And then something begins to dawn on him, a little light bulb goes on over his head. And he turns to his wife and says, “Golde—do you love me?” “Do I what?” she says. “Do you love me?” he responds. “Do I love you? With our daughters getting married and there’s trouble in the town,

you're upset, you're worn out, go inside, go lie down. Maybe it's just indigestion.” But Tevye persists, “Do you love me?” And Golde begins to think, “Do I love him? For 25 years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked your cow, after 25 years, why talk about love right now?” But as they reminisce about their own arranged wedding day they realize that the life together that they've made has brought them close and they do love each other.

That's the question that Jesus asks Simon Peter in our scripture today. Do you love me? It's some days after the resurrection and the disciples have left Jerusalem. We don't know why, maybe they just decide that they wanted to go home for a while. So they go back to Galilee, back to what they know, back to fishing. They take the boat out, maybe to fish, maybe to talk, maybe to think about all that has happened in the last weeks: controversy, trials, floggings, arrest, betrayals, denial, death and resurrection—and a lot of questions and confusion. They are simple men, they don't know about all these things, what they know is fishing. So they take the boat out, these fishermen, and great fishermen that they are—they catch nothing. So they are about to bring the boat back in as the day is breaking and a voice calls to them from the beach, “Catch anything?” Stupid question, it's what everyone wants to know “What did you catch?” But they bite their tongues lest their frustration come out and they say, Nothing. That's when this stranger tells them to put the nets down on the other side of the boat. As if they haven't tried both sides, but they do it and the net is so filled with fish that it would swamp the boat if they tried to haul it aboard. So they pull it behind them as they make for shore, already knowing that this is no stranger on the beach, it's Jesus. When they come ashore they find that he has breakfast prepared for them on the beach. They eat together, fish and bread, and at some point in the meal, Jesus turns to Simon Peter and says, “Simon, do you love me more than these?” More than what, more than who? Does he love him more than the other disciples love Jesus? Or does he love him more than he loves the trappings of his old life—the boat, the nets, the fish? Simon responds, “Yes, I love you.” Then Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.” Whatever that means. Then he asks again, “Simon, do you love me?” Peter says, “Yes, you know that I love you.” And Jesus says, “Tend my sheep.” And then Jesus

asks again, “Simon, do you love me?” He asked the same question again, Peter thinks, what's going on? He's asked me if I love him three times—Oh my God, three times, he's asked me three times . . . On the steeple of our church is a rooster, a weathercock that turns with the wind. But it is there as a reminder, a reminder of that darkest of nights when after he had affirmed his loyalty to him, Jesus turned to Peter and said, “the rooster will not crow this morning until you swear three times that you don't even know who I am.” Three times. And now Jesus asks three times, “Simon, do you love me?” He's being given a second chance. Is that a good idea? Peter ran away when Jesus needed him most. He not only ran away, he denied that he even knew Jesus. When push came to shove, he chose to save his own skin rather than stand by his friend. But Jesus gives him a second chance. And Peter takes it. With a broken heart he says, “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” And Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.”

Why does he say that? Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. What does all that mean? When Tevye asks Golde, “Do you love me?” She could have just said, Yes. But she thinks about it. She says, For 25 years I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. For 25 years my bed is his, if that's not love, what is?” It is not just saying you love someone, it's living that love. Golde loved Tevye not because she said so, but because they built a life together. Peter's love for Jesus was not found in his words on Maundy Thursday and not even at this breakfast on the Sea. Love is in living out that love for Jesus by taking care of Jesus lambs, by feeding his sheep. Our love for Jesus is not in saying we love him, it's not in singing songs about our love for Jesus, it is in taking care of each other. Do we love him? Do we love God? We know that God loves us, the evidence is all around us, but do we love him? How do you know? How does God know that we love him?

Because when someone is sick, we visit and care for them. When someone grieves we hold them in our arms. Because when people show up to this church everyday to get food, there is food on the shelves and someone to give it to them. Because when five kids from another congregation want to go with our kids on a mission trip but don't have the money, we say, “Don't worry, we'll take care of it,

we'll make it happen, because you're our kids too.” Because when someone disappoints us, lets us down, even if it is someone we trust—our sister, our brother, best friend, pastor—we give them a second chance, and a third and a fourth because that's what Jesus did with Peter and with each one of us. We love God by loving each other—in deeds as well as words. We love Jesus by caring for his sheep, by caring for one another. Because there's a rooster on our steeple and it reminds us that we all are in need of forgiveness and a second chance. Our God is the God of the second chance. As the psalmist says, “You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,” God rescued him and gave him another chance. He does the same with us, he never gives up on us. Jesus never gave up on Peter. And Peter never got over it.

Years after this breakfast, on a dusty road outside of Rome, Peter had finally done enough to annoy the authorities and they took him out and laid him on a cross, to die just like the one whom he loved, whose sheep he had tended for all the years in between that morning on the lake and this last day by the road. Only at the last moment, Peter had second thoughts again. Maybe he heard the rooster crowing in his mind, but he knew he wasn't worthy of all the second chances Jesus had given him. He asked his executioners to crucify him upside down because he wasn't worthy of suffering a death similar to the death of Jesus. Do you love me? Jesus asked. Peter did. Do you love me? Do we love him?