

The Questions of Holy Week: Do You Love Me?  
John 21:1-19  
April 4, 2010 (Easter, 11:00 Service)  
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights  
Pastor Dave Carver

As we begin this morning, I have a couple of questions I'd like to ask you.

Who did Grant Wood use as the model for the farmer for his painting  
"American Gothic"? (His dentist)  
The US Icon Uncle Sam was based on Samuel Wilson, who worked  
during the war of 1812 as a what? (Meat Inspector)  
Who was the only U.S. President to appear on 'Rowan and Martin's  
Laugh-in'? (Richard Nixon)

Have you heard those questions before? Each of them was used in the  
"Million Dollar Round" of the game show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. In case  
you have lived on some other planet for the last ten years, or have recently come  
out of an Amish community, let me tell you the premise of the show: participants  
answer a series of increasingly difficult multiple-choice questions, each of which  
is worth more money. The players sit in the "hot seat" as the host gives them  
time to think, and then as they make their choice, the host always says, "Is that  
your final answer?"

For a while, *Millionaire* was the most popular program on television, in part  
because we loved watching someone writhe in that hot seat, knowing that their  
lives would be changed forever on the basis of how they answered the question.  
Very rarely do we see our lives so profoundly impacted by a single question.

This week I have encouraged you to look with me at the many questions  
that come up during the last week of Jesus' life. I counted more than twenty-  
seven distinct questions in the Gospels from Maundy Thursday until the end.  
Today, we look at what is, according to John, the last conversation that Jesus  
had with his disciples.

We pick up the action some time after the first Easter. It is apparently  
weeks after the events of Holy Week, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. Peter,  
Thomas, Nathaniel, James, and John, along with a couple of the other fellows,  
have left Jerusalem and have returned home to Galilee. More than that, they've  
returned to their fishing business. There is no mention of the resurrection; no  
explanation of how they got there or what they thought about it. Just a few  
fellows in a boat, doing business as usual.

Well, Jesus shows up, and they recognize him, and they have a nice  
cookout on the shore together. Apparently, he doesn't seem to think much about  
the fact that they're back at their old jobs, either. He even helps them catch a  
few nice fish.

And then we get to the questions...focused for us in verses 15-17. Jesus pulls Peter aside, away from the rest of the crew, and three times asks him, "do you love me?"

Now, for those of us who know the story, we can't read that and *not* be reminded of the conversations of John chapter 18, where three different people approach Peter and say, "You're friends with Jesus of Nazareth, aren't you?" And three times, Peter stammers out some pathetic lie, denying his relationship with Jesus.

So three times, people ask Peter, "Do you love him?", and three times, Peter says, "What? No way! Not me!" And now, after the death, after the resurrection, after appearing to Peter in the locked upper room on that first Easter day, Jesus himself asks Peter, "Do you love me?"

Awkward...

Now for most of my life, I've read these pages and I've heard Jesus ask that question as if he's telegraphing his punches. "Look, Peter, we all know about those denials. Heck, I even predicted them. Look, I want you to know, I forgive you and everything, but let's not let this happen again, OK? Watch your step, mister."

And there is some merit to this approach, to be honest. Jesus, in repeating his question, allows Peter to somehow "buy back" each of his denials. They can wipe the slate clean and get on with the business of starting the church. You could write a book about how Jesus' three-fold questioning of Peter is a means by which Peter claims his forgiveness and launches a career as the pre-eminent Apostle. And people would buy that book. Heck, five years ago, I'd have probably bought that book.

But I have to say that it doesn't really square too much with the Jesus that I have been coming to know in recent years. This year, in particular, I have waded through the Gospels and seen Jesus time and time again as an agent of unimaginable love and grace. It's hard for me to read all the way through those accounts of his life and ministry and then get the end and picture Jesus, in his last conversation with the men he's come to love so deeply, looking at their spokesman and saying, "Hey, buddy...I'm keeping my eyes on you. You better straighten up and fly right...that's all I'm sayin'..."

I can't picture that because the Jesus I am coming to see in the Gospels is a Jesus of extravagant grace and unstinting love. Have you ever looked at someone else and thought that you want for them more than they want for themselves; that you desire and hope for them more than they are able to desire and hope for themselves? That you see aspects of beauty in their lives to which they appear blind? That you loved them so much that it hurts? Yeah. Jesus knows that feeling. Every day. About seven billion times.

So check me out on this: what if the three-fold asking of this question was not a sort of heavenly “I told you so” to the Apostle, but rather an unfolding of his grace?

Look at the first question: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” How do you hear that question? Is Jesus saying,

- Simon, do you love me more than these other guys love me? (are you my BFF?)
- Simon, do you love me more than you love these other friends? (am I your BFF?)
- Simon, do you love me more than you love your fishing boat and nets?

You see, that’s three different ways to interpret that question, isn’t it? And this morning, I’m leaning towards the last one. Here’s Simon Peter, having had a heck of a run with Jesus and the boys over the past three years. It all culminates in Jerusalem, where Jesus is killed and then rises again. Heck, we all thought he was going to be the messiah. And rising again didn’t seem to hurt his chances of that. But the thing is, well, he didn’t *act* like a Messiah once he rose from the dead. I mean, if we were thinking that Jesus was going to raise an army and kick out the Romans before Palm Sunday, then why wouldn’t we think that a resurrected Jesus wouldn’t go in and do the job himself?

But the thing is, well, that’s not what happened. Jesus was raised from the dead, but then he kept coming and going for a while. I mean, it was really cool at first, but then we started to wonder what we were supposed to be doing with it. There’s no kingdom coming. We want to teach like he taught, but why? I mean, what’s the point? I’m not sure I get it. Maybe I wasn’t cut out to be an apostle.

And so Peter and the other fellows do what I probably would have done. They go home and look for their old lives. I’m sure it doesn’t happen all at once...but a guy’s gotta eat, right? And so slowly, slowly, slowly, we just all sort of slipped back into our old routines.

And then Jesus shows up on the beach, and makes breakfast. And he looks at Simon, and he looks at the fishing equipment, the nets, the boat, and Simon’s old life. And he says, “Simon, do you love me more than you love your routine? Do you love me more than you love your habits? Do you love me more than you love the way you’ve always done it?”

And he doesn’t ask once. He keeps on asking. And he keeps on loving. If anyone is convinced that he doesn’t deserve the love of Jesus, it’s Peter. It’s me. But he won’t stop. He keeps asking: “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” He just keeps on coming back.

I’d like to suggest that he does that because he wants to give you a chance to answer that question right now.

Look: on the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, participants are asked a series of different questions that are, frankly, designed to screw them up. And when you get one wrong – that’s it. You’re done. You go home, back to your life as a teacher or a cab driver or a sausage stuffer. Do you think that if you were one of those people who got that final question wrong that you’d wake up every day thinking about it? Wishing you could change your “final answer”? Wondering what life would be like if you’d have used your one shot at an answer in a different way?

John 21 is the opposite. Peter is asked, not a series of different questions, but the same question over and over again. Jesus looks at the things laying around in my life and he says gently, “Dave, do you love me more than these?” Every blessed day in your life, Jesus looks at you and asks you, “Do you love me?”

Listen to the truth, friends: Jesus is not asking you that question over and over again because he is in a hurry to badger or berate or punish or judge you. He’s asking you that question today because he wants to give you a chance to answer that question today. Today!

And what I love about this text is that the end of the conversation is not Peter giving the “right” answer. It is not a conversation about reminding Peter about the last time he got three questions wrong. The conversation ends with reminding Peter about another conversation that they had.

We believe that the gospel of Mark was the first gospel to be written, and that it was probably written with Peter’s help. In Mark’s gospel, the first conversation that Jesus and Peter ever had was when Jesus looked this man in the eyes and said, “Follow me”.

We believe that the gospel of John was probably the last gospel to be written, and that it was probably written after Peter himself died. And in John’s gospel, the last conversation that Jesus and Peter ever had was when Jesus looked this man in the eyes and said, “Follow me.”

He is risen! He is alive! He is crazy in love with you. He loves you so much it hurts. A long time ago, he forgave anything that there ever was or will be to forgive about your life.

And today, and every day...every blessed day, he comes to you and says, “Do you love me?” In the midst of where you are right now, he wants to know, do you love him? Today, do you love him? And will you follow him? Today, will you follow? He keeps coming back because he wants to have you with him. Will you love him? Will you follow him? Come with me. We can do this together. Amen.