

**CONVERSATIONS WITH JESUS: Do You Love Me More?**

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*Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher*

Jesus meets his friends in an ordinary place. On the shore of a lake they have fished a hundred times before. Hills behind them they have all climbed time and time again.

Simon Peter, the denier, swims through the water as fast as he can fully dressed, to get to Jesus.

And there, on the shore, Jesus prepares breakfast for his friends. We know, though, it is more than breakfast: it is a communion meal. Jesus has this way of breaking bread, as the two travelers to Emmaus understood (Luke 24), and in the breaking of the bread we know he is with us.

The talk about the number of fish in the net seems to be important for John. Details like this aren't just slipped into the gospels by accident. John wants us to know something important so he tells us the nets are full to overflowing but they don't break. Then, just so we don't miss the point, John tells us there are 153 fish in the net.

Which seems like a strange thing to point out. Until you realize that the number, for the Jews, represented every variety of fish. John is telling us that every possible kind of fish is caught in the net. And the net doesn't break.

Only John isn't talking about a fishing net: John is talking about the church.

You see people in the early Church were already wanting to throw some fish back. They were already debating what to do with people who had served in the Roman military. They were already discussing what to do with Jesus followers who had gone through a divorce. Just like we have debates about who should be in the Church...and who shouldn't.

I used to hang out, as a boy, with some very devout folks. They were Jesus followers. And they were pretty particular about what kinds of fish they allowed in their net...in their church. If you smoked cigarettes, they threw you back. If you were a woman and you wore make up, they threw you back. If you drank alcohol, they threw you back. If you listened to rock n' roll music, they threw you back.

The thing I gave them credit for was being honest. They didn't beat around the bush: you knew where you stood with those folks.

I realized, soon enough, that their net wasn't big enough to hold someone like me.

There is always this debate in the Church about how big the net will be. Some of us are very worried that if we let every kind of fish in the net, if we let every kind of person who wants to follow Jesus in the Church, the net will tear. The Church will come apart.

One day two young men came into my office. They handed me a thirty-three page document that explained how the United Methodist was spiritually lax. Un-disciplined. Non-Biblical. Morally bankrupt.

They said we needed to talk more about hell in our preaching. I told them too many people live their lives with the stench of hell in their nostrils. I said we talk about sin, about how we so often make a mess of things, but my hunch is that most people needed a glimpse of

heaven a whole lot more than they needed to have their noses rubbed in their sin. And that God had called me to preach the Gospel...the Good News.

They went on.

I listened.

The reason they had come to me is because we had a woman singing in our choir who was living with a man. They weren't married. Tom was an Navy man who had, ten years before, gone through a brutal divorce. After his wife had betrayed him numerous times. Yvonne had been married before but her husband, at the age of 40, had died of a heart attack. They began dating. And decided to move in together. I had told them I was glad they loved each other, but I was praying they would either make a commitment to one another as husband and wife or decide to live apart.

Anyway, these two young men said they were leaving the United Methodist Church because I was letting a woman sing in the choir even though she was living a sinful life. They thought I should do something about that. They thought she shouldn't be allowed to sing until her life was straightened out.

They were worried, you see, about the size and strength of the net. They were worried the net -the Church- wouldn't hold. That it wasn't strong enough to handle all kinds of people.

What did I say to them?

I told them they had no idea what kinds of conversations I had been having with Tom and Yvonne. I told them that often we have very honest, tough, loving conversations with people. Where we talk about where they are and where we believe God wants them to be. But those conversations are private.

I told them that if they wanted me to toss Yvonne out, if they wanted me to toss back every fish whose life wasn't right where it ought to be, I wasn't going to do that. I told them about how John points out that there were 153 fish in the net. I reminded them that John says there is room in the Church for every kind of person who wants to follow Jesus. Whether they are a brown trout or small mouth bass or carp or swordfish.

They weren't pleased. Not at all. They left our church and joined one that was a whole lot more careful about what kinds of fish it let into its net.

How big is the net?

How strong is the net?

John tells us the net was full of every kind of fish and it held. The net held.

After the meal is over, Jesus and Simon Peter take a walk. (The way we know they have walked away from the main group of the disciples is because of verse 20. That verse says this: *Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them.*) So Jesus and Peter take a walk, and as they walk Jesus asks Peter if he loves him.

The actual question, in verse 15, is this: *"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

Don't you wish we knew who or what the word "these" referred to? *"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"* Who or what are "these?"

Could it be Jesus lifts his head, his eyes, and points to the lake glittering in the mid morning sun, the boats pulled up on the shore, the nets drying in the warmth of the day, the green rounded hills of Galilee where pasture land and fruit orchards exist side-by-side in abundance? Does Jesus lift his head and throw his arm out to point to the beauty of the place...that is home to Peter?

“Do you love me more than these?” he asks.

When people ask me where I am from, I smile funny. I tell them I am sort of from everywhere...and nowhere. Sharon laughs, if she overhears the question, and she'll say, “Do you want the short version or the long?” I've never really had a place. A little village on the northwest coast of Alaska is where I grew up, I think. Or at least where a significant part of that process took place. (Many of you have long wondered when I am going to grow up, I know. I know...) But I was born in Brussels. And have strong memories of Africa. The near east side of Indianapolis is so familiar...the Arlington area and 16<sup>th</sup> street. I used to go to the Arlington Theater on Saturdays and I would catch crawfish in a little creek that ran under the road a few blocks west of our house on Leland.

My mother in law, Marian, will sometimes be talking about people from Walkerton. That's where I went to high school from my sophomore year on. She names the person and tells me where they lived and who they worked for. Finally, I wave her off. “I only lived there for three years,” I tell her, “and then only for the summers when I came home from IU.” It is my way of letting her know that although I graduated from John Glenn I am not really from there. You know?

So I have never really been from anywhere.

Until now.

Now I am from Elkhart.

Elkhart is home.

I love having a home. I love driving down Jackson late in the afternoon and watching the sunlight reflecting up off the river. I love having been here long enough that I know where things used to be but aren't any longer. I love knowing the town so well that even when the white left turn only lane arrow wears off the pavement, I still know I should be shifting left. People from outside the area don't know that but I do...I've been here long enough. I love telling visitors where to get a great Italian or Mexican meal. I love walking into my favorite coffee shop and having them know me so well they know what I want -almost- before I order. I love sitting in my study at home and hearing the sound of the trains announcing their presence. I can hear them in the distance and I smile because I live in a railroad town. I open my study window in the summer and, on a quiet night, I can hear the subdued hum of traffic on the toll road.

I like having a place.

I like having a home.

I like having a people.

Do you know what it is? It is being settled...comfortable. Things just “fit.” I've been here so long things just fit. I know the ground. I know the place. I am a part of the place.

I wonder if Jesus looks up at the hills and the lake and the boats, points to this place that Peter loves so much, this place where his roots go down, and he asks, “Do you love me more

than this place...this ground...this water...do you love me more than being settled and comfortable?"

Because, you see, when you love Jesus...that sometimes means leaving your place behind. Not letting your place limit you...control you...determine what you will or will not do for God.

*"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

Maybe Jesus lifts his head, lifts his eyes, and looks off in the direction of the disciples. They have had -Peter and the other ten- their good moments and bad. But they have become brothers.

"Do you love me more than your friends...your group...your brothers and sisters?" Is that the question Jesus is asking?

One of my favorite writers is Donald Miller. I don't know if his stuff will stand the test of time, but I do know I enjoy reading him -and people like Ann Lamott and Barbara Brown Taylor.

In one of his books Miller talks about taking a cross-country trip from Texas up to Oregon. He talks about how the land changed as they drove west and north. He talks about the people he and his buddy met as they traveled north and west. But the thing that is cool about the book is Donald Miller had a traveling buddy.

They drove in silence. Sometimes they talked. Most of the time they got along with one another. Sometimes they fought. Sometimes they questioned one another. They told one another some of the questions they had about God. They told one another about growing up. They told one another about the things they hoped would happen in their lives...and the things they were afraid wouldn't.

Do you know how good it feels to have buddies...brothers...sisters...friends?

We were built for this, weren't we?

We were built to be social creatures.

Genesis points this out right at the very beginning: God makes man. God sees that it is not good for man to be alone. So God makes a helper for the man...a companion.

I told you a couple weeks ago about a "road trip" some buddies and I took down to Franklin, Indiana. For the funeral of the mother of a friend. Do you know how good it felt to walk through the door of the church with two buddies who I have known for more than thirty years, and then to put my arms around another buddy I have known since I was in graduate school?

When one of us is going through deep water, we stand with them. We encourage them along. We tell them they're not alone. We remind them they belong to Jesus.

*"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

It could be that Jesus looks up and nods in the direction of the other disciples.

Do you love me more than your friends...your family...your brothers and sisters?

Which is the right question to ask because sometimes following Jesus means leaving... or frustrating...or disappointing...our friends.

Do you love me more than these?

“Are you following your friends or are you following me?” is another way Jesus might ask the question.

“Are you about pleasing your friends and family, your group or tribe or class or nation or political party, or are you about pleasing me?” is another way Jesus might ask the question.

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

Perhaps Jesus points back at the net...pulled up on the shore...and the fish spilling out of the overflowing baskets.

Could it be Jesus is asking Peter, “Do you love me more than spectacular miracles?”

Could it be Jesus is asking Peter, “If following me meant the nets weren’t always full, if following me meant your life would be tough and your prayers weren’t answered in the way you wanted, would you still love me...call me ‘Lord?’”

Could it be Jesus is asking Peter, “Do you follow me, do you call me Lord, because of what I can do for you...give you...or are you following me simply out of a devoted heart? Or is your relationship with me all about the hope that I’ll keep your baskets filled with fish...your 401.k robust...your children well...your business in good shape?”

Which is a good question to ask.

Because it is easy for us to make following Jesus a magical thing. We follow him if he will guarantee us a good life...a protected life. Sometimes, when people are going through tough times, when there is a family crisis or the checkbook is running low, they’ll say to me, “How could this be happening to me? I’m a Christian...I love Jesus.” I understand the question. I understand the feeling. But the words point to an assumption that to follow Jesus is to make a “deal” with God where we assume God is guaranteeing to keep our baskets full of fish. But to follow Jesus isn’t to make a deal with God...it is not a business transaction.

To love Jesus is to love him for who he is and what he has done...and how true he is. Not because of what we’ll get out of it.

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

This is the question Jesus asks. Three times.

### **WHY THREE TIMES?**

Why this question? Why three times -beyond the obvious explanation that Jesus had denied Jesus three times so Jesus was giving him the chance to balance the ledger? Why three times to Simon Peter?

### **Just Needs to Hear.**

Maybe Jesus just needs to hear it –it could be *that* simple.

Maybe Jesus, after all he has been through, just needs to hear his friend say, “You know what? You’ve got me, man. I’ll never step out of our friendship, again. I’ll never step away from your way, again.” Even if you are the Son of God, to go through what Jesus went through that last week in Jerusalem, was shattering. So maybe Jesus just needs to hear the words: “I love you.”

### **Something to Think About.**

Or perhaps Jesus repeats the question three times because he wants Simon Peter to think about this. Following Jesus is something you better think about, first.

If you are in confirmation, we want you to think about this. We don't want you standing up, promising your life to Jesus, promising you'll lift your cross and trust Jesus enough to follow, and then have you telling us in six months or three years that you were "just" joining the church. We don't want you telling us, "Oh, I never really intended to be a servant...I never really intended to be showing up in worship when it wasn't convenient or really cool...I never thought you were serious about giving 10% or more of my money away to God."

If you are going through membership training, we want you to think about this. Because when you say you love Jesus and you join his Body -the Church- you are giving your life away. To God. You are selling out to God. You are deciding that you are going to let God use you to make a difference. You are making a commitment to be an instrument for healing and justice and peace-making.

When Jesus asks the question three times, it may be his way of saying, "Please think about this. Because you were 'sure' about what you were doing before Jerusalem, and then you disappeared. Slipped away. Shrank back from the tough stuff. So think about it..."

### **To Serve.**

You see one reason to think about this is that to follow is to serve. You caught that, right? Simon Peter, the impulsive personality who had a faith that was solid as a rock one minute and as shaky as sand the next, the fisherman who got into a shouting match with Jesus about whether they should go to Jerusalem and risk the cross, the man who denied Jesus three times and then slipped away into the crowd, is being entrusted with the task of leadership.

And to lead, in the kingdom Jesus is all about, is to serve.

If you are going to say you love Jesus then you are going to tend sheep. Feed the lambs of God. Loving Jesus isn't about sitting back, watching kingdom work, but to love Jesus is to become a leader...it is to get involved in tending sheep and feeding lambs.

Do you know one of the primary pieces of work the lay leaders and staff of this church -and nearly every other congregation- do? It's trying to figure out the Rubik's Cube of volunteerism. Don't get me wrong: we have an extraordinary care of people who give and give, serve and serve. But then there is about half of every congregation that sits.

There is an invitation to work with youth, and they sit.

There is an invitation to help be a part of the welcoming, hospitality ministries, and they sit.

There is an invitation to help hold babies in the nursery, or be a part of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grade Sunday School teaching team, and they sit.

There is an invitation to help clean up the church yard in the spring, and they sit.

To say you love Jesus is to make a decision not to sit.

As soon as Simon Peter says he loves Jesus, Jesus starts telling him to take care of the sheep...feed God's lambs. Be a leader by serving.

The reasons Jesus says that is because the lambs need to be cared for. There is a need.

And because there is joy in serving. There is life in serving...in getting into the game...in giving ourselves away. There is life and joy in that.

## To Give Up Control.

There is another reason why Jesus wants Simon Peter -and us- to think about how we answer the question, "Do you love me?" The first reason is that to say you love Jesus is to say "yes" to being a servant. And the second reason Jesus wants us to think is that to love Jesus, to follow Jesus, is to give up control of your life.

And that is a hard thing.

I don't know about you, but it is certainly a terribly difficult thing for me. I'm often thinking about my next step and the step after that and the step after that. I don't like anyone telling me where to go or what to do. I like being in control!

But Jesus lets Peter -and us- know that to love him is to give up control. We may end up being carried somewhere we had no intention of going.

Donald Miller, in his book *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, talks about how our lives are a story. And God wants to help us write a great story.

Donald, like most of us, was sort of making up his life as he went along. Doing what made sense to him. Doing what he wanted to do. But then he started listening to the voice of God. He talks in his book about listening to the Voice of the Writer -who he sees as God.

One part of Don's life, a very painful part, was the father who had stepped out of his life when Donald was very, very young. For more than twenty years Don had no contact with his father. He had written his father off.

This is what Miller has to say about the Voice...about letting God write the story of our lives (pgs. 87-88):

*The real Voice is (still) and seems to know, without confusion, the difference between right and wrong and the subtle delineation between the beautiful and the profane. It's not an agitated Voice, but ever patient as though it approves a million false starts. The Voice I am talking about is a deep water of calming wisdom that says, Hold your tongue; don't talk about that person that way; forgive the friend you haven't talked to; don't look at that woman as a possession; I want to show you the sunset; look and see how short life is and how your troubles are not worthy worrying about...call your friend and see if you can get together, because, remember, he was supposed to have that conversation with his daughter, and you should ask him about it.*

*I became more and more aware that somebody was writing me. So I started listening to the Voice, or rather, I started calling it the Voice and admitting there was a Writer. I admitted something other than me was showing a better way.*

*So I started obeying a little. I'd feel God wanting me to hold my tongue, and I would. It didn't feel natural at first; it felt fake, like I was being a character somebody else wanted me to be, and not who I actually was; but if I held my tongue, the scene would play better, and I always felt better when it was done. I started feeling like a better character, and when you are a better character, your story gets better too.*

*I was driving over the Bybee Bridge and listening to Talk of the Nation on NPR when a story came on about a man who was reunited with his father whom he hadn't seen in twenty years. I listened to the story apathetically, not applying it to my life, when suddenly the Voice, and I am talking about the Writer who is not me, pounded on the keyboard, broke the pencil on*

*the paper, and was so emphatic that I had to pull my truck over by the golf course. After thirty years of, honestly, never thinking about it or having anything like a desire to do so, the Writer who is not me told me I was to find my father.*

*I told the Writer no. I sat in my car by the golf course and told the Writer no. I know he had talked to me...I told him I wasn't a kook and I didn't want to know my father.*

*I shrugged it off for as long as I could. I went on saying no to God, and I stopped holding my tongue. But the Voice came to me when I crossed the Bybee Bridge and when I went to sleep at night. The Voice said I was to find my father and go to him and sit across from him and tell him I forgave him.*

*I told God no again, but he came back to me and asked me if I really believed he could write a better story – and if I did, why didn't I trust him?*

*(One night) I heard God's voice again...saying I should find my father. And this time I trusted him, and I knew he would guide me through a better story.*

Jesus asks the question three times.

To love him is to serve...

And to serve is to give up control.

Miller writes *So I started obeying a little.*

"Do you love me more than these?" Jesus asks.

Think about it. Think about it...