

**Text: John 21:15-17**

*When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." 16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." 17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep.*

There is one subject that most people, it seems are very comfortable talking about. Yes, you are right, it's the weather. It is somewhat of a Mid-west phenomenon. It always interests me, when I am out in the community, or even when I am here at church, the sheer number of conversations about the weather that can be had.

Now why is that? Is the weather here really that interesting? I don't think so! Is it, perhaps, because talking about the weather prevents us from having to talk about other things – harder things – more important things? You've heard the old saying that the two things you don't talk about in polite company are politics and religion. That takes a pretty big chunk out of possible topics of conversation, doesn't it? And it seems equally unacceptable to talk about how things are **really** going in a person's life. "How are you?" "I'm good." "I'm great." "I'm OK." Or perhaps, on occasion, the other extreme is realized when someone responds to your "How are you?" by giving you a detailed medical report including some details you really didn't need to know.

Is it possible that we are not very good at talking about what is **important**? Is it possible that we find it difficult to ask questions and to give answers related to very personal matters? For example, how would you respond to the question, "How are things between you and God?" You might respond, "Well, pastor, if you asked me, I'd answer you." But what if your wife asked you? Or what if your mother asked you? Or what if your fellow Christian congregation member asked you? How comfortable would you be responding to the question, "How are things between you and God?"

Today the resurrected Jesus teaches us how to talk to people. He teaches us that:

**Simple Questions Can Be Difficult**

- 1. Difficult to ask.**
- 2. Difficult to understand.**
- 3. Difficult to answer honestly.**

**1. Difficult to ask.**

This Word of God finds both Jesus and Peter in a difficult, awkward, somewhat threatening situation. Peter and the disciples had taken a very early morning fishing trip. A good fisherman knows that dawn and dusk are pretty good fishing times, and Jesus' friends went out at night to be sure to catch the morning bite. But John tells us that they had been skunked. No fish. Until a stranger on the shore suggested that they throw their net over the other side of the boat. I know that fishermen can be stubborn, so things must have been bad enough to listen. And when they tried it, they hit the mother lode. Lots of fish.

John goes on to tell us that this began to look familiar to the disciples. John even was brave enough to suggest about the stranger, "*It is the Lord!*" Well that's all Peter needed to hear. He went overboard and headed for the shore. The disciples followed, but when they arrived, something remarkable happened. Jesus was cooking breakfast for them, but for once no one, not even Peter, had anything to say. John recalls, "*None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you.?' They knew it was the Lord.*" It was undoubtedly a happy, if silent breakfast that they had with Jesus that day.

Did you ever notice how quiet a noisy banquet hall can become when everyone is eating? Food tends to slow down talking, but there were other issues on that Galilean shore that morning. There were what a counselor might call "unresolved issues." There was the issue of all of the disciples running like scared rabbits from Jesus when he was arrested. There was the issue

of only John showing up at the cross. And then there were the personal issues regarding Peter. Do you know how remarkable it was for Peter to be quiet? No more, “*Even if all of these leave you, I will never leave you!*” No more, “*Lord, I’m ready to die with you.*” No more, “*That crucifixion will never happen to you, Jesus.*” Peter was quiet because his track record proved him to be a bag of hot air. Not only had he failed to live up to his boastful promises, Peter had denied, three times, under oath, that he even knew who Jesus was. To his credit, Peter seems to have recognized his wrong. The Bible tells us that after the denial, he “*went out and wept bitterly.*” But the scene here was tense. It was awkward. Jesus, Peter, the disciples sitting there, having breakfast – in silence.

John suggests that Jesus and Peter went out for a walk after they ate. And breaking that silence, Jesus got to **the hard question**. *When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"* Ouch! Jesus didn’t use his new name, Peter. That meant “rock.” A rock doesn’t deny his Lord. Jesus uses his old name, Simon, the one he had before he became a follower of Jesus. “*Do you truly love me more than these?*” Ouch! Yes, Peter had claimed that in the past. But his life couldn’t cash the check that his mouth had signed!

The question was painful. And Jesus wasn’t asking it just to twist the knife that is already sticking in Peter’s heart! **It was difficult to ask**. But it was the loving thing to do! Peter’s heart needed the assurance of forgiveness. Jesus needed Peter to get on with the work of the Gospel. So he asked. He risked Peter’s anger. He moved out of his comfort zone. He did it all because he loved and valued Peter as a redeemed soul and a valued citizen of His Kingdom.

Sometimes God calls us to ask the difficult question as well. Our Peter might be a family member, a church member, a friend or a neighbor. While it might be uncomfortable, it may be necessary because we want that person to recognize that Jesus also views them as a redeemed soul and a valued citizen of His Kingdom. So we are ready and willing to ask, “Friend, how are things between you and God?” And with God’s blessing, the conversation will go on, even though the question might be .

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## 2. Difficult to understand.

In English, we miss the little word game that Peter was playing with Jesus. While Jesus asked Peter if he really loved him more than the other disciples, we might understand Peter’s response as, “Well sure, Jesus, I like you just fine.” At this early point in the conversation, Peter had a hard time seeing where Jesus was going with the questions. In fact, Jesus asked again, using the same word as the first question, “*Do you truly love me?*” This time there was no comparison to the other disciples. Just an earnest desire on Jesus’ part for Peter to look at the bigger picture.

I wonder if our asking the difficult questions in life of fellow Christians is equally misunderstood. How many questions, how many different ways of saying something, how much patience does it take for us to communicate to a fellow Christian that what is really important is their individual relationship with God? And, dear friends, let’s be honest with ourselves, asking the simple but difficult question may inflict some pain! John’s account continues. *17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."* The picture became clearer to Peter. “Three times I denied the Lord. Three times he asks me about loving him.” This time Jesus changed the question, his word for love, to match Peter’s answer. The point had been made. Peter had a repentant heart. The relationship was restored. And with each answer, Jesus reminds Peter of his present and ongoing work of feeding the lambs and sheep of the Good Shepherd’s flock.

Even though honest conversation and insightful questions might be uncomfortable for the asker and the hearer, it is still the loving thing to do. Jesus did not want the recent past to destroy the more distant past or to eliminate the future. We would do well to have the same attitude in our conversations with fellow Christians.

## 3. Difficult to answer honestly.

So far, I have been placing you mostly into the role of the one asking the hard questions. Now I’d like you, for a moment, to sit in the other chair, to put yourself in Peter’s shoes and view the conversation through his eyes. Perhaps you will be able to see the value of Jesus’ loving approach to Peter and the approach he wants us to take for each other.

Why was the usually vocal Peter quiet? Why was he, along with his cohorts, afraid to ask Jesus who he was? Perhaps it was because a barrier had developed in the relationship. Perhaps it was because they felt guilt and remorse because of what they had and hadn't done. Jesus went the extra mile to "restore gently" those men to the work of his kingdom. He needed to remove the baggage and the guilt that clouded the relationship so that they could continue to live and work together.

Why do people who love Jesus, or at least say they love Jesus, stay away from regular public use of God's Word and Sacrament? Perhaps there are as many answers to that question as there are people to ask it to. Maybe guilt keeps a person away from the means of grace. Maybe it is a broken relationship with someone in the church. Maybe it's just that Satan has entered their lives and turned their priority list upside down so that everything looks backward. Whatever the reason, that person has entered a spiritual danger zone. And perhaps what we need to hear at that time are the answers we gave to some questions a few years ago.

Did you know that, by definition, anyone who is a communicant member of our congregation has answered some key questions some time ago. On our confirmation day, whether at age 14 or as an adult, we are asked questions about what we believe. But then there are questions – and answers – about what we want to do. **Do you intend to continue steadfast in this teaching and to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it?** We respond, **I do, and I ask God to help me.** And next, **Do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the teachings of God's Word, to be faithful in the use of the Word and sacrament, and in faith and action remain true to God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as long as you live?** We respond, **I do, and I ask God to help me.**

We've all made that promise, and part of God's help in keeping it is in the gift of fellow Christians. He gives us each other along with the courage to ask the difficult questions. If I have forgotten my promises or have strayed away from my intent, I thank God for someone who will come along and ask me about it. It is finally God through his Holy Spirit who restores me to spiritual health. But perhaps I wouldn't survive spiritually if there wasn't someone there to ask the question, How are things between you and God?

Let us, together, resolve as a congregation to do what we can to restore each other gently. Let's have the love and courage to ask the hard questions. Let's pray that God will move the hearts of his people to always give the right answer. We'll always have the weather to talk about. Let's ask God to give us courage and opportunity to talk about what is really important.

**Amen.**