

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, April 29, 2012**

DO YOU LOVE HIM?

John 21:1-19

You've probably seen the polls that indicate that the vast majority of Americans believe in God. Those polls also say they believe – most Americans – that Jesus is the Son of God. And most Americans believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Most of them probably think that makes them Christians. One would wonder about that, given the nature of the question. Most of us when we hear the word “believe” think we are being asked “Do you think this is true?” So people say yes. Most people believe that God is real and that Jesus is His Son and that He rose from the dead. Let's take a poll here and see how you stack up with Gallup. How many of you believe that God exists? How many of you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? We're doing pretty well. How many of you believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Very good! Not a single Christian here. What there are here, at the very least, are demons, because you know what? Demons know all those things are true, too.

The question is not whether you think that a given fact is true. That's easy. It's important, and I'm not saying that it's not necessary. But it's not enough. Jesus actually makes that very clear when He asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” What He makes clear is that it's not enough to know with the head that a certain fact is true. What's necessary is for one's entire life to be given over to the One about whom we know those facts. We're going to take a look at that and get into that a bit more, but we want to lead up to it.

I'd like for us to do that by looking at the start of Chapter 21. This conversation between Jesus and Peter takes place after breakfast. This chapter, chapter 21, is sometimes referred to as an epilogue to John's Gospel. I'm sure you know what the word “epilogue” means. It's Latin for “I forgot to put this stuff in, so let me stick it at the end just for kicks.” Actually, we don't really know exactly why this was appended to John's Gospel. It's pretty clear from Chapter 20, verses 30-31, that that was probably supposed to be the end. Jesus did other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, John writes, which are not reported in this book, but these are written so that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing, you may have life in His name. If it had been me, I'd have just stopped there. It's a great ending. But John needed to append more. It was really important to append more, because just as you will read a novel, for instance, and there will be an epilogue at the end that ties up some of the loose ends, there are a couple of loose ends that he really needs to get to. He needs to get to them because there may have been people in the church who wondered about them. We'll get to that in a moment.

This happens in the context of a fishing trip at the Sea of Galilee. John calls it Tiberius, the Roman name. It's an unknown number of days after Jesus had appeared to Thomas and that, in turn, was a week after the resurrection. So it was sometime during this 50-

day period between the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. There are seven of His disciples together. These guys got together and went fishing. Maybe that was to take their minds off of everything that had gone on. Or maybe it was simply they needed the money. They needed to catch some fish so they could sell them and feed themselves and the others around them. They caught nothing that evening. We know it was evening. Fishing was primarily a nighttime activity since that's when the fish would come nearest the surface. They didn't use rods, they used nets, so they needed the fish to get as close to the top as possible.

They didn't catch anything and Jesus saw that they hadn't caught anything and so He called out from the shore (they don't know it's Him; they think it's just some guy out there on the shore). He calls to them and He says, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find some." At which point Peter and Thomas and Nathanael look at one another and say, "Everybody's an expert, isn't he? Maybe somebody should explain the laws of physics to this guy. Water is wet and furthermore things move through it, which means they're not going to stay on the right side. They can go from the left to the right and back again to the left. Isn't it amazing what fish can do? If we haven't caught any, there aren't any here!" They don't do that. I don't know, maybe they were desperate. They do throw it out on the right side and, guess what? They bring in this huge haul of fish. John recognizes a miraculous occurrence when he sees it – and you'll have to admit, any of you who have ever fished with a net, that it has to be some kind of a miracle when there are no fish over here and there are over 150 of them over here. Have you ever seen fish collect quite that way? John sees this as a miracle and in the process he recognizes that it's Jesus. Peter, being the guy that he is, jumps out of the boat. That makes perfect sense to me. If you're a loon! Peter did that kind of a thing. He was a man of impulse and so he put on his outer garment, so that he would be bulkier in the water and find it more difficult to swim, and swam to shore. The others, of course, not being particularly impulsive people, rode to shore. Novel idea!

They got together on land and Jesus said, "Bring some of the fish you've just caught." He'd already started the fire, He had some fish and He had some bread. Anyone think of anything that might have reminded you of? The feeding of the 5,000. I seem to remember somebody else preached on that recently and mentioned that it's the only one of Jesus' miracles that appears in all four of the Gospels. So you know it was important and here you have an allusion to it. Fish and loaves. Jesus said, "Bring some of the fish you've just caught." Simon Peter then got on the boat and he dragged the net off. It was full of large fish, 153 to be exact. Some people find some kind of occult meaning in that: that was John's way of saying the second coming would be 153 years after Jesus' ascension. There's no significance to that number. It's in a sense a mark of authenticity, a way of saying, "You know how we know that this happened? Because there weren't just a lot of fish. We can even tell you how many there were, because there was an accountant there (probably a guy named Jerry) who counted them." You always have to have the OCD guys in the background to do whatever everybody else doesn't want to do. So somebody actually counted how many fish there were. There were 153.

Together they made breakfast. So here they are, they'd seen Jesus again. He has once again demonstrated to them not only that He's alive, but that He's capable of surprising them every moment. So here they are. They had finished eating and He said, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love Me more than these?" Peter heard that question and maybe he was put out, or maybe he was surprised that his loyalty would be questioned. "Yes, Lord," he said, "You know that I love You." Maybe he said that because he knows that Jesus knows everything that's in our hearts. But there was a problem, and I'm sure you remember it. Peter had denied so much as knowing Jesus, much less loving Him, following His arrest. Three times the man who had declared that he would never ever desert Jesus had denied that he even had a clue who He was.

This, by the way, was the primary reason why this epilogue is here, because one of the loose ends that's left is that Peter denied Jesus three times. How is it that Peter was restored? Well, he was restored, at least in part, in this conversation. Jesus asks him, "Peter, Simon, son of John, do you truly *agapao* me?" *Agapao* was from the Greek word *agape*, which means love. In asking that question He was asking Peter to consider the recent past, just a few days before, and He was asking him, even though he had denied Jesus three times, was he willing now to give everything for Him. Devote everything that he had to Him, every fiber of his being, his will, his purpose in life, his very life if need be. Was he willing to give that? And Peter's response is, "Well yes, Lord, you know that I love You." But he doesn't use the same word that Jesus did. The word that he uses is *phileo*, and that's another Greek word that also means "love" but doesn't mean it in quite the same way.

Think of the difference this way: My wife asks me, "David, do you love me?" And when she asks she wants to know if I'm willing to give my entire life for her. And I respond, "Yeah, I like you. I think you're a wonderful human being and I get a charge out of every minute we spend together." I tell people she's my best friend. Is it the same thing? No, it's not the same thing. It's good. I'm sure she would be gratified to hear that, but it's not what she was asking. *Phileo* has to do with the affectionate kind of love, like love for a best friend. I suspect the reason Peter changed the word was because looking back on what happened in the previous days, he thought he wasn't up to pledging everything. He was willing to admit that he had tremendous affection for Jesus, that Jesus was his best friend, but he wasn't willing to say, "Yes, I give you my life." That's the reply of a man who feels guilty. And he had good reason to feel guilty. But Jesus replies, "Okay, if that's the case, if I'm your best friend, if you really do feel that way about me, then I have something I'd like for you to do. I'd like for you to feed my lambs. I want you to take care of the brethren. I want you to feed them with the gospel of grace. I want you to give yourself for them." What He does here is tie together the two great commandments, to love God and to love your neighbor. Okay, fine, if you love Me then love them deeply.

That's an indication that Peter has been restored but because he had denied Jesus three times, our Lord felt it was necessary to put the question to him again. So He says in verse 16, again, "Simon, son of John, do you truly love Me (*agapao*)?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love You (*phileo*)." Still can't make that commitment. The

third time Jesus recognizes that this is a man who is struggling. This is a man who is not entirely sure yet. This is a man who recognizes his own weaknesses and his own shortcomings. And that's good. So when He asked that question again the third time, He said, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me (*phileo*)?" And Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love Me?"

My suspicion is that at that point Jesus asks him a third time because Peter denied Him three times. Peter probably thought, "Why are You pushing? Why so insistent?" But Peter responded, "You know all things. You know that I love You." And there's a change of word there, but it's not *phileo*. The word for "know" changes. Previously Peter had been saying, "Lord, you know that I love you. You know it in your head. (In the same way that all those Americans know that Jesus exists and that God exists, and that Jesus rose from the dead.) You know in your head that I love you." And here he uses a different word and it's a word that indicates experiential knowledge. "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you. You see that. Yes, I denied You. But You've also seen that I love you." And Jesus' response was the same as the other times, "Feed my sheep. If you love Me, if you love your brothers, if you love your sisters, if you love your children, if you love other peoples' children, if you love Me, love your neighbor."

That's the other part that all too many Americans who think of themselves as Christians don't quite get. You can't separate those two things. You can't tell George Gallup that "I know God exists and that Jesus is His Son and that He rose from the dead and I keep every penny for myself and nobody gets a minute of my time except me and the people who are really important to me. I look out for number one, just like God does." Stupid thing to say. But it is in fact the way that all too many of the answerers of George Gallup's polls do answer.

When you're called to love Jesus you are called to love those whom He loves – and is there anyone, anyone whom Jesus does not love? That kind of throws the field open, doesn't it? There are no restrictions you can place on that. No way to narrow it down and say that Jesus only loves the ones that look like me, only loves the ones who sound like me, or only loves the ones who look at the world like me. Peter was called to feed the sheep of Jesus and the thing of it is, of course, that they didn't know who exactly was in the sheepfold and who was not. So it was a much wider call than we sometimes realize.

Peter was also asked to do something else. Well, he wasn't asked, he was told that he would. In verses 18 and 19, Jesus lets him know what's coming. "You denied Me three times, once, in order to save your own skin, but I tell you that eventually things are going to happen that you don't plan on happening. When you're old, someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then He said to him the same thing that He said to him the very first moment that Peter laid eyes on Him three years before. He said, "Follow Me." When Jesus called Peter to feed His sheep, He was telling him to do nothing more than walk in the footsteps of our Lord. And He told him about the kind of

death that he would die and with which he would glorify God, He was also asking him to do nothing more than to walk in the footsteps of his Lord who had given His life, even in the midst of Peter's denial, for him.

Now as He prepared to leave the world and send the Holy Spirit, He was sending Peter out and in the process He was sending us out as well. Because the call to Peter is the call to us. Peter's not the only one who is asked, "Do you love Me?" George Gallup doesn't ask that question in his polls. But Jesus asks that question of each and every one of us who raised our hands before. "Do you love Me?" He says. If you do, look around this room, look around Kingstowne, look around northern Virginia, look to the ends of the earth and feed my sheep. And in the process you will glorify the living God