

DO YOU LOVE ME?

Mother's Day is a week from today, but I'll be on vacation next Sunday so I won't be here to celebrate it with you. Even so, as I was preparing to write this sermon I thought about Mother's Day, and my mom who passed away almost three years ago (Wow! It's so hard to believe that she has been gone almost three years). I thought of my mom because when I read today's lesson from John's Gospel, an incident from childhood came to my mind. I will preface this by saying it really is amazing the things we remember from way back when we were kids, and how detailed those memories can be.

I was nine or ten years old, and it was a Friday evening. And on Friday evenings, one of my favorite television shows was on: *The Wild Wild West*. Do any of you remember that program? It was a Western-themed "James Bond on horseback" adventure show. Jim West and Artimus Gordon worked as government agents during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant, and they had all kinds of neat, unbelievable secret spy-type gadgets at their disposal to help them in their weekly mission to defeat the evil villains and save our country.

Like I said, it was one of my favorite TV shows, but it was on later than my usual bedtime; and every Friday I used to haggle and bargain with my mother to let me stay up and watch it. Well, on this particular night, for whatever reason (it couldn't possibly have been because I had been misbehaving!), my mother was playing hardball. She refused to let me stay up and watch *The Wild Wild West*. Nope. Not on that night. It was bedtime for Bonzo, and there was no room for negotiation.

I knew this called for drastic action, so I decided to pull out my trump card, the Ace up my sleeve. It was the most powerful ammunition in my arsenal. I thought that if I used it, there was no way I could lose. It would surely melt my mother's heart and she would have to cave in and allow me to stay up and watch *The Wild Wild West*.

"Do you love me, mommy?"

I don't know how, but my mother saw through my ruse. And her response caught me off guard. She looked at me and said, "No. Now go to bed."

Curses! I'd been foiled!

When someone asks, "Do you love me?" there's sometimes a motive behind it. In fact, what that person may really be saying is, "If you love me." If you love me, then show me. If you love me, do this for me. As in, "Mommy, do you love me? If you do, then you'll let me stay up past my bedtime so I can watch *The Wild Wild West* on TV."

It would seem that Jesus wanted something from Peter when he asked, "Simon, Son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Feed my lambs."

A second time: "Simon, Son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

"Take care of my sheep."

And once more: "Simon, Son of John, do you love me?"

With a hurt and disappointed heart because Jesus asked him a third time, Peter replied, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." To which Peter might well have added, "Don't you?" And Jesus responded, "Feed my sheep."

It wasn't out of a sense of insecurity or uncertainty that Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Jesus knew full well that Peter loved him. Jesus didn't need to ask that question over and over. Peter's love for Christ wasn't up for debate. After all, he'd spent three years of his life following Jesus around, watching him, listening to him and learning from him.

No, it wasn't that Jesus was in need of reassurance and wanted to hear Peter say three times, "Yes, Lord, I love you." It was that Peter needed to say repeatedly, "Yes, Lord, I love you," in order to convince and reassure himself that, not only did he love Jesus, but Jesus still loved him. You remember that, while Jesus was being put on trial for his life, Peter was out in the courtyard, watching. And he denied knowing Jesus three times, just as Jesus said he would. Each of those denials was an act of rejection. Three times Peter disowned his Lord. Three times Peter was, in effect, telling Jesus, "I don't really love you as much as I had claimed."

Maybe Peter had started to believe in his own mind that he really didn't love Jesus. Or at least he must have thought he didn't love Jesus nearly enough. And conversely, I'm sure Peter had strong doubts that Jesus still loved him after his act of denial. But now, Jesus was giving Peter the opportunity to atone for those three denials by saying, "Yes, Lord, I do love you." I'm going to make you say it three times, Peter, one for each of your denials, until you once again believe in your love for me the way I believe in your love for me."

"Yes, Lord, I do love you."

"Yes, Lord, I do love you."

"Yes, Lord, I do love you." There was another reason Jesus asked Peter to declare his love for him, not just once, not just twice, but three times. And that is, Peter was going to need all the strength and courage his love for Christ could generate to be able to faithfully follow his Lord and meet the challenges and sacrifices he would be facing—challenges and sacrifices that would ultimately lead to Peter's persecution, terrible suffering, and his own brutal death by crucifixion.

So, when Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" I think he was really asking, "Peter, how much do you love me? How far will your love for me go when you're being physically battered and mortally threatened? How much will you be ready to sacrifice because of your love for me?" Would you go so far as to give up your life for me?

And that's the ultimate and definitive expression of love for someone, isn't it? A person's willingness to give up his or her life for another. "There is no greater love than this; to lay down one's life for one's friends."

An unknown author wrote, "Many years ago, when I worked as a volunteer at Stanford Hospital, I got to know a little girl named Liza who was suffering from a rare and serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her five-year-old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness.

The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. I saw him hesitate for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, 'Yes, I'll do it if it will save Liza.' As the transfusion progressed, the boy lay in a bed next to his sister and smiled, as we all did, seeing the color return to her cheeks. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, 'Will I start to die right away?'

"Being young, the boy had misunderstood the doctor. He thought he was going to have to give her all his blood; to give his life for her." During that moment when the doctor asked the boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his older sister to help save her life, he was, in effect, hearing the doctor ask him, "Do you love her more than these?" And his response was almost immediate. "Yes, you know that I do." And the boy was willing to give his blood, give up his own life, for her.

"There is no greater love than this; to lay down one's life for one's friends."

For one's sister.

For Christ.

I don't think it's going too far to say that, every day, in some way or another, the risen Christ calls our name and asks us the same question he asked Peter. And we will have lots of opportunities to respond to Jesus in the course of our lives.

"Do you love me more than these?"

"Do you love me?"

"Do you love me?"

"Then feed my lambs. Feed my sheep." Amen.