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## Do You Love Me?

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn on the Third Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022*

*John 21:1-19*

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations that invite a key response from us. Sometimes we get it right, and sometimes we really blow it. In my life, parenting provides many daily opportunities to show up or fail to show up. One night I was lying in bed trying to get to sleep, and I suddenly realized that that day, my kid had opened up to me about something vulnerable, and that I had responded by lecturing instead of listening. At the time I hadn't been paying close enough attention to realize what that moment was actually about, but later looking back I did and recognized I just blew it in a way that mattered. I wanted to kick myself and vowed that I would look for the next opportunity to choose differently. The very next time I had the chance, I paid the most respectful and tender attention I could, and a beautiful conversation ensued. The difference between those choices, and their impact, remains stark in my mind.

In the end, when we make mistakes or when we come up against times in life that need our best, what does the most good isn't just saying we are sorry. It is change. It is wanting from the core of our being to change and asking God for help. It is choosing differently the next time and believing that with God's help we can.

And thank God, there are lots of times in life that we do get to try again. But sometimes we make mistakes that we can't get a do-over about. Today's gospel story starts with that assumption. The disciples' whole world was shattered. Jesus mattered so much to them. Imagine being in the presence of someone who radiated healing and love and wisdom. A spiritual master whose teachings you truly believed could change the world. One who might even lead your people out of their endless cycles of oppression toward freedom. And then at the critical moment, when a key response is invited from you, you blow it, and your teacher is arrested and tortured and killed. The disciple Peter was like that. Shortly before his arrest, Jesus had told his disciples he was leaving. Peter had demanded to know why he couldn't follow Jesus then and there. Peter had said he was willing to die for Jesus, which I imagine part of him was. But that same night, standing at a charcoal fire, while Jesus was being beaten and accused and tortured, Peter had denied three times that he even knew Jesus. And as Jesus had predicted, the rooster crowed just as Peter uttered his third denial. He realized to his shame what he had done. In other gospel versions of this story it says that Peter went out and wept bitterly. And then Jesus died. There was nothing Peter could do. I imagine the sound of a rooster crowing would haunt him all his life.

But just in the place Peter knew was hopeless, this place of his biggest regret that he could never take back, Jesus finds a way to meet him. Jesus is standing before a charcoal fire. The only other time a charcoal fire is ever mentioned in the New Testament is when Peter stood before the charcoal fire denying Jesus. Just like the rooster crowing, I'm sure the charcoal fire would always bring Peter back to those terrible moments when he failed, when he denied the one he loved. It

is no accident that Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves Jesus. This wasn't passive aggressive neediness on Jesus' part. It was the opportunity to make amends for the three times Peter had denied he knew Jesus. It was a vast and compassionate mercy. Against all odds, beyond his capacity to imagine, Peter has the chance to do as much good as he had done harm. You know that I love you, he has the chance to say three times, what he wished he would have said around that other charcoal fire. And each time, Jesus says, Feed my lambs. Jesus is saying, show that you love me by caring for my people. Jesus gives Peter not the placebo of saying that everything was OK, but the chance to try again, and then a purpose and a commission going forward that Peter would honor all his life until at last Peter did do what he had said he would do, to follow Jesus all the way to death. Tradition tells us that Peter was eventually crucified.

There are many things we can't take back or do over. But one of the unanticipated gifts of the resurrection is the chance to make amends where we thought that was impossible. I'm aware that in this lifetime we do not have literal resurrections—I wish we could, for our loved ones who are gone!—but I'm also aware that if Christ's resurrection means anything, it means that we can always begin again. That in the end, the power of love always wins over the powers of cruelty and selfishness and violence and death. Spring always comes after winter. Ravaged areas of the earth, when human beings leave them alone, come back; forests regrow, and animals begin to thrive again. And so when we find ourselves again around a charcoal fire—when we are in circumstances that remind us of times gone by, that we wish we could change—in this moment, in this time, with God's help, we can show up differently. What are things in your approach to life you have wanted

to change? Through the compassionate presence of God who is everywhere, we can choose love and courage over our selfishness and fear. To allow wonder and curiosity to replace our judgment. To choose a sensitivity to beauty instead of apathy and numbness. To allow the slow pace of God's loving work in us to continue.

The details in today's gospel story—the charcoal fire, going fishing—also represent that past that is gone that can never come back, and the chance to choose how we live in the new normal. Jesus rose from the dead, alleluia. But he did not come back to the way things used to be. They didn't get their old rhythms back. Jesus did meet them where they were—returning to fishing, the one thing they knew—and he showed them the abundance that was right under the surface. It was right there.

Here we are in this beautiful sanctuary together as a community. We who have lived through this pandemic will never again take for granted the ability to gather together in person, or worship with signing, or praying to God together not through a recorded image on a screen, but in person feeling the presence of the Spirit. And now that we are here, we can decide why we are here. Now that we know we cannot take this for granted, we can try to recognize where the risen Christ is inviting us to have the courage to fall in love with God, to speak and own our reasons for being here without regard for the risk. And for those of us who feel church is more like fishing all night and catching nothing, the presence of Christ is here, inviting us to recognize the extravagant nourishment and abundance that is just under the surface, that is right here for you where you are the most hungry, the most worn out.

Whatever we have been as a congregation and as individuals before the pandemic, we are here today. Every moment of our lives is a chance to express love and not denial. Every single moment that we are alive is a chance to begin again with purpose, no matter what we have lost or what mistakes we have made. It is a chance to choose dignity in suffering and to respect the dignity of others who have forgotten it in themselves. Today we have the chance to express our love, not just in words, but in action. Do you love me? Jesus asks. Let us say yes, and then feed his sheep. Let us care for one another and all life in his name. Amen.