

LAST ENCOUNTERS

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The Curriculum & The Question
Koinonia 5.22.11
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Do you love me?
Do *you* love *me*?
Do you *love* me?

End of John's Gospel. Last chapter. They are having their final meal together: Jesus and the disciples. This is it. Final encounter. They will never see each other again, not like this. Final moment to see and feel and hear and touch. Anything that needs to be done or said or known or demonstrated, must happen now. There is no tomorrow. Not like this. This is it.

Ever been there? Ever been beside someone's bed who is about to die, knowing that breathing will not continue much longer and these eyes will not be open much longer and this voice will not speak again nor this body be in your reach ever again? Ever had the u-haul packed, knowing you will not return to this city, these streets, this culture, this home, these people? Ever known that after many months or years of trying to make it work that this break-up is final, that the rituals of accompaniment, the mutual decision making, the co-parenting, the laughter, shared meals, and love making—it's over. Ever been there? Final encounters...last moments...*this is it* times. Anything that needs to be done or said or known or demonstrated, must happen now. This is it. Ever been there?

What did you want to do? In that last encounter...what did you want to do?

Did you want to reach inside and plant your love permanently in the body of the one dying even though you knew they would be gone tomorrow? Did you want to trade bodies and take on the pain of AIDS, the pain of cancer, the

pain of memory loss...just so the other person could have a few moments of relief before they crossed over? Did you want to disappear completely or did you want to be more fully present than you'd ever been in your entire life? Did you want to say something that you'd been holding onto for years and never had the courage to say, like "how could you?" or like "I'm so sorry, please forgive me" or like "all I ever wanted was to make you proud" or like "you always made me so proud" or like "please don't go, I'll never love anyone the way I love you."

Last encounters reveal the truth about relationships. What we want to do or say in those moments are probably evidence of what we've wanted to do and say all along.

In a minute I'm going to tell you what Jesus wanted to say and do in his last encounter with the disciples. But first I must remind us of what he'd *already done*.

He'd *already* taught them how to fish. Remember that from last week? He'd *already* demonstrated fishing techniques and he'd *already* told them verbally where to cast their net. So he'd already equipped them with the tools they needed and modeled for them how to teach fishing. And he'd *already* prepared a meal for them. This week we find the disciples on the shore, eating bread and fish with Jesus—not the fish they caught, though Jesus did acknowledge their catch. No Jesus *already* had fish and bread prepared for them when they arrived on the shore. He was *already* prepared to feed them and feed them he did.

Teachers in the room have got to realize the brilliance of Jesus' pedagogy, of his teaching techniques. There is no hole in this curriculum, nothing missing in this lesson plan. So when Jesus leaves final instructions for his disciples, when he says "feed my sheep," there can be no question about exactly what he meant. He'd *already* shown them, equipped them with and prepared for them, absolutely everything they'd need. There can be no question about how

to feed. There can be no question about what to feed. There can be no question about how and what to teach new disciples that want to join the fishing/feeding frenzy. No question about any of that.

But there is a lingering question. One that hangs in the air. One that gets repeated again and again and again. One that cuts like a knife through any sentimentality or good intentions lazily washing up on the shore that last morning together. One that grips the human heart tight enough to suspend breathing.

Do you love me?
Do you love me?

This is God speaking. This is Alpha and Omega, Creator of the world without end, Liberator of the captives, God of the empty tomb. This is God. God who makes water flow from a rock and bread fall from heaven. Word made flesh. Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Logos, Prince of peace. This is God speaking. And this is his last encounter with the people he loves the most.

“Do you love me”??? Those aren't the words of an all powerful, all dominant, all controlling deity. Those are the words of someone or something that yearns, that longs, that hopes, that needs. A God that yearns to trust that the love he feels right now will continue after he's gone. A God that longs to be remembered, a God who hopes there's something about this love that will not die no matter what because it's that strong, that beautiful, that powerful, that holy.

This is our God.
Our God, the God who has already equipped us and prepared us and fed us.
Whose only final question is “Do you love me?”

And this God is not satisfied with the lame-duck answer

Peter provides. How many times have we been dissatisfied when asking the question and hearing the answer: “You *know* I love you.”

Oh you know I love you.

You know.

You know, right?

No. Show me.

Feed my lambs.

Tend to my sheep.

Feed my lambs.

Show me.

Put your body where your mouth is. Behave what you believe. Take your light out from under that bushel basket. Don't be afraid of your own salty flavor. Don't keep your mustard seed from growing. Show me.

You know what the religious life is about? It's about putting our bodies where our mouths are. It's about behaving what we believe. It's about showing God, in the way we live, the answer to God's final question. I don't give a damn if you come in here every single Sunday singing about how much you love God if you aren't behaving every other day of the week out there like you love God. Here's the deal: our God yearns and longs and hopes and needs. That God is one partner in the relationship. You're the other partner. We are the other partner. You/we are equipped and prepared and we have been fed with everything we need to fulfill God's yearning, longing, hoping and needing. So that isn't the question.

Last encounters reveal the truth about relationships. What we want to do or say in those moments are probably evidence of what we've wanted to do and say all along.

God's final question—Do you love me—is evidence of what God's been doing and saying all along.

You know what the religious life is about? It's about

answering that question all the time. Not when it's convenient. Not when you're in a pinch. All the time. Not when people are about to die. Not when you're about to move. Not when that relationship is about to end. All the time. It's about recognizing, today, anything that needs to be done or said or known or demonstrated, must happen now. You answer God's question by using the tools you've been equipped with to feed others--today. You answer God's question by stepping up and playing ball after days and years of preparation—you play ball today. You answer God's question by being fed when there's nurture in front of you--today. No other you, no other today, not like this: light of the world, salt of the Earth, mustard seed making its way up through the soil. No other you, no other today, not like this.

Do you love me?

Let every moment of your breathing, working, teaching, feeding, and love-making life—**be** the answer to our beloved's final question.

Amen.

