

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Easter 6

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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

Do you love me? Really?

—1 John 4:7-11

"I love you, Darling!" says the husband as he kisses his wife good-bye and then heads out the door for a clandestine rendezvous with his secret lover. "I love you, Sweetheart!" says his wife in return, as she waits for him to leave, so that she can go out and feed her gambling habit. "I love you, Mom!" says the boy, as he heads out the door to play, leaving behind a sink full of dirty dishes for Mom to clean up and a room that smells like a pig sty. "I love you, Mom and Dad!" says the young woman, as she leaves to go meet up with her friends, where she'll do some drugs—something that she knows very well would break her parents' heart. "I love you, God!" says the worshiper in church, who quickly fumbles around in his wallet to find a dollar to throw in the offering, so he doesn't look bad when the plate comes by. "We love you, Jesus!" says the whole family in church, as they say their prayers and sing their praises, before they pile back into the SUV and get into a huge screaming argument on the way home.

Do you love me? Really?

I remember a time when Jesus asked that question. "Do you really love me?" A bunch of guys were out fishing on a lake. They hauled in a big catch, and then they pulled the boats onto the shore to have some breakfast. After breakfast some of them went for a walk on the shore of the lake. And Jesus asked Peter, "Do you really love me?" "Well, yes I love you," Peter answered. But as they walked a little farther Jesus asked the question again. "Peter, do you love me?" Maybe Peter started to sweat a little bit the second time the question came, but again he answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Then Jesus asked the question a third time, and this time the question really hurt. The third time was especially painful for Peter, because it brought back the terrible memory of that fateful night when Peter had not only failed to say and show he loved Jesus but had completely disowned and denied him three times. "Simon Peter, do you love me?"

We talked a couple weeks ago about going for a walk with Jesus. How would you like to go on *that* walk with Jesus? The one Peter took with Jesus along the shore of the Sea of Galilee? Or how about if the Lord put his hands on your shoulders and looked you in the eye and asked, "Do you love me?" "Well, yes, Jesus, I do love you." But then to hear the question again: "Do you love me? Really?" I think about this time my face is starting to get red, and I'm sweating under the collar, and I'm starting to feel very uncomfortable. My life is flashing before my eyes, I'm having flashbacks to all the times I've acted very unlovingly toward Jesus, toward my family (my "loved ones"), toward my neighbor (whom I'm to love as myself), toward my fellow Christians. And I'm thinking about all the times I didn't love God and I didn't love my neighbor but only thought of myself. "I do love you, Jesus! I do love my family and my neighbor. I even try to love my enemies. But I cringe and hang my head in sorrow and shame because my love has been so feeble and weak and cold."

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." The only way we can love at all is because God has given us his love and enabled us to love. If I do something nice for someone else, so that I can feel good about myself, that's not love; that's self-interest. If you do someone a favor or do something kind for someone, hoping to be thanked and have people tell you how much they appreciate you, that's not love; that's self-serving. When someone inflamed with passion says, "I love you!" and commits immoral and shameful acts, it's not love; it's lust. If we bring a gift to the Lord and put it in the offering plate, so that we can feel like we're "doing our share" or "helping the church," that's not a gift of love; that's pride. If we do anything, no matter how outwardly nice or kind or generous or philanthropic that is ultimately intended to benefit or gratify or derive pleasure for ourselves, it's not love.

Holy Scripture tells us what love really is: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude; it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). When God gives us his love and channels his love through us, only then can we show the kind of selfless, altruistic, self-sacrificing love that the Bible calls *agape*. It's love that's completely focused on serving God. It's love that genuinely cares about the body and soul and welfare of my neighbor. We love because God is love and God lives in us. We love because he first loved us.

As a Christian you have been born again into God's loving family. You were brought through Holy Baptism into the family of grace, God's family where *agape* abounds. You know God, because God has revealed himself to you in the Scriptures. He tells you who he is, the Triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He has shown you his love for you. He has surrounded you with his love. He has filled you with his love. God's love is nothing like what human beings naturally think of as love. God's love is unilateral. It is completely one-sided. It is

unconditional. It has no strings attached "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." Talk about unilateral, unconditional love! When did God resolve the problem of your sins? It was before you were ever born, before you were a twinkle in your mother's eye. It was before you ever thought about it, before you ever believed it, before you ever repented of your sins, before you were lovable, before you were unlovable. God resolved the problem of your sin when he gave his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. "This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and gave his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

So what if we were to turn the question around and ask God: Do you love me? Really? Because I know I haven't been very lovable. Can you still love me, God? I have done some horrible things, and not by accident, either. I've sinned knowing full well that what I was doing was evil. Do you love me? Really? There is no reason inside me that you should love me, certainly not because of who I am and not because of what I've done to make myself lovable and acceptable. Do you love me, God? Really? What's the answer? How can we *know* God loves us? It's simple: He tells us! Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. God's reply to that question never changes. His Word to you is the same as his Word in the Old Testament, to his people of all times: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness" (Jeremiah 31:3).

But sometimes we still doubt God's love. When we're hurt or we feel despondent or betrayed or victimized we don't always feel loved. Do you love me, God? Really? Then why don't you fix my problems? Why don't you answer my prayers when and how I want you to? Why did you let me get hurt? Why did you take my loved one? Why am I alone? Why am I afraid? If you love me, why don't you step in and do what I want you to do? In the face of those kinds of questions and sometimes in the face of our anger against him, God steps in with his words and promises of love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16). God not only tells us, "I love you." He shows us the extent of his love for us. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God says to us, "Yes, it's true, in this world of sin and darkness you will have many problems. But I've already fixed your greatest problem. My Son Jesus came to earth to experience all the hurt and heartache this life could bring, he came to bear the burden of the world's sin heaped upon him, and with his death on the cross he removed the world's sin, paid for the world's sin, and took away the world's sin. In his love he went through hell for you, so that you never have to experience eternal wrath. By rising from the dead he rendered death powerless. All of this he did for you for one reason: He loves you! So yes, you have problems in this world; this world is a wicked place. But you're just passing through. And you're right," God says, "I don't always act like your personal butler and jump to give you everything you ask for. That's because I love you. So I only give you what's best for you, what will help you. Sometimes it hurts, sometimes it's painful, but it's always good for you, always for the best. And yes, I took your loved one out of this valley of tears, because I love them, too. And you'll be apart for a little while, but you can look forward to a reunion with your loved one who finished in faith, and we'll be together in heaven." God not only promises, he delivers. "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8).

Love came from God, and Jesus laid down his life for you. Love came from God, and now love lives in you. Jesus lives in you. His Spirit lives in you. God's love lives in you. I'll emphasize John's words here again: God is love! Where there is God, there is love. "Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." You and I are blessed to be part of a loving congregation. At Emmanuel we are surrounded by Christian love. God has placed us in the company of genuine, kind, generous, giving, loving people. God's Spirit lives in us and moves among us. God's love touches people's lives here in acts of kindness. That love comes from God. It's only possible because God's love has warmed our hearts, forgiven our sins, filled us with his Spirit, so that now we can love and forgive and encourage and be giving and loving to one another.

So friends, whenever you ask God, "Do you love me? Really?" the answer is always "Yes! I have loved you in Christ before the world began." Your sins are forgiven, because of God's love in Christ. Eternal life is yours, because of God's love in Christ. Walk in God's love, live in God's love, cherish God's love, reflect God's love, share God's love. Because he loves you. Really! Amen.