My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson, from St. John Chapter 6. It refers to the motives of the people. Why are they seeking Jesus?

25 When they found him [Jesus] on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” 26 Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. (John 6:25-26, RSV)

In this morning’s sermon, I would like us to consider a question we can borrow from our evangelical brothers and sisters. It is a soul-searching question. It goes this way: “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?”

This is a rather rare question in the Lutheran Church, and yet I believe there is an important variation on this question that was important to Martin Luther. I am referring to what is called Luther’s “for you” theme. “For you. For you! [In the quiet of your heart, insert your own name there: For you!]” Luther made a crucial distinction between what he called “historical faith” versus what he called “saving faith.” Historical faith is knowledge of the factual story of the gospel. The one with true historical faith knows the story of Jesus and knows it correctly. But that is not good enough, from Luther’s point of view. Luther points out that even the devils have true historical faith. They know all about Jesus and they know that he is the Savior, but they hate the whole idea, and they want nothing to do with Jesus except to oppose him. And so it is that objective knowledge of the story of Jesus is good, but not good enough.

What we need is a kind of knowledge of Jesus that leads us to rejoice. We need a kind of knowledge of Jesus that we can take personally. That is why Luther emphasized so much that little prepositional phrase “for you.” And so in the distribution of the Holy Communion, Luther wants each of us to listen for those words “for you,” and take them to heart, apply them to ourselves, and be encouraged by them. I guess that over the course of the whole liturgy I could probably save a few minutes if I were to simply say to each person at the communion rail, “The body of Christ. The blood of Christ”—those short phrases. But God willing, I will always press on beyond that to the full way of expressing things—the way Martin Luther would like: “The body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ given for you!” Calm faith that the Blessed Sacrament is the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is not yet good...
enough from Luther’s point of view. What Christians need and what they deserve is the conviction that the body and blood of our Lord Jesus are given for us—not just for Peter, James, John, Mary Magdalene, St. Augustine, St. Francis, and so forth, but also for us! And in believing this, we will go on to believe that everything is now changed for us. Things are better than they would have been, now that we know, each of us, that Jesus died for us for the forgiveness of our sins that we might have eternal life. Martin Luther certainly believed in a personal relationship to Jesus. If a modern-day evangelical were to ask Dr. Luther, “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?” Luther would reply, “Amen! You bet I do! I do indeed have a personal relationship with Jesus. And you should too!”

Now let us turn toward this morning’s Gospel story from St. John Chapter 6. Jesus is probing the motives of the people in seeking him. He says that they seek him, not so much because they believe in him as the One he is, the very begotten Son of God from all eternity. The people do not seek him because they believe in him this way, but rather because they ate their fill of the bread. We heard that story last week—the story of the multiplication of the few loaves of bread and the fish, a multiplication enough to feed 5,000 people. The people believe in bread, sure enough, but they do not yet believe in Jesus. They seek him for the sake of the bread. They seek bread, naturally enough, but they do not yet seek him. But what Jesus really wants from them is their love. Imagine that: our Maker desires our love! That he loves us is an immense thought. But that he desires our love is also an immense thought! He wants the people to seek him because they love him. That is the nature of love. You want to be close to the beloved. You want to please the beloved. You want to live for the beloved. You want a personal relationship with the beloved.

The Holy Gospel according to St. John is especially good at lifting up this idea of a personal relationship with Jesus. St. John is the one who especially speaks of love. Jesus has done much for us because he loves us. Jesus, in turn, seeks our love. And we will be better men and women, boys and girls, if we grow in love and in a personal relationship with Jesus.

When it comes to a large perspective on the Gospel according to St. John, the Jesuit scholar Fr. Raymond Brown has long been helpful for me.1 Raymond Brown was a colleague of our longtime pastoral associate Rev. Dr. David W. Lotz. Pastor Lotz was fond of Fr. Brown, who was a world-renowned New Testament scholar. They were colleagues at Union Seminary here in town. I am very glad to say that Pastor Lotz once arranged for Fr. Brown to sign a boxed two-volume set of Fr. Brown’s The Death of the Messiah. Pastor

1Especially his little volume The Churches the Apostles Left Behind (Paulist Press: New York, 1984)
Lotz gave that two-volume set to me as a gift—a gift which I suspect Vicar Caleb Douglas looks upon with admiration and maybe some envy.

Raymond Brown notes that St. John is the one who talks most about our love for Jesus. It is good to be a disciple of Jesus. It is even better to be a disciple who loves Jesus. It is the question that our resurrected Jesus presses upon St. Peter in the last chapter of St. John: “Peter, do you love me?” Jesus asks this question three times of St. Peter. It is a question worthy of some honest reflection. Peter straightway answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” But this is an answer not to be quickly given. The question deserves some reflection and personal self-examination. “Peter, do you love me? Only then, only when you love me is it right for you to feed the sheep.” Peter is the natural leader of the apostles. The very keys of heaven have been entrusted to Peter. But high office and leadership in the church do not matter unless the disciple loves Jesus.

Again and again in the Gospel of St. John we find Jesus raising the question of love.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. (John 15:9, RSV)

Raymond Brown points out that St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. John all believe in the church. St. Paul uses the image of the Body of Christ to describe the church. St. Peter speaks of the People of God, as in a verse we quote in the baptism service:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9, RSV)

St. John also uses community images to speak of the church. He thinks of the church as the flock of the Good Shepherd. Also he speaks of the Vine and the branches, with Jesus being the Vine and Christians being the branches. But St. John shows little interest in the various offices and gifts within the church. St. Paul, by contrast, observes that just as a body has many elements, hands and feet and eyes and so forth, so there are various offices in the church. There are apostles and prophets and teachers and administrators and so on. But for St. John what matters is simply the connection between us and Jesus. He doesn’t talk about one sheep being more authoritative than another sheep, or one branch being more gifted than another branch. What matters is that each sheep should know the Good Shepherd and follow his voice. What matters is that the branch remains connected to the Vine.
Abide in me, [says Jesus] and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (John 15:4, RSV)

Now let us return to the question of our evangelical brothers and sisters: “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Do you love Jesus?” When St. Peter of old is asked by Jesus, “Peter, do you love me?” we think to ourselves, “Yes, Peter does love Jesus and he ought to love Jesus.” Peter has walked with Jesus. Peter has heard the sweet preaching of Jesus. Peter knows of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Peter has good reason to give his heart away to Jesus.

But, my friends, all of this is true for you and me too. It is possible for us to know and to love our Beautiful Savior. We can learn of him in the Bible, we can talk with him in prayer, we can walk with him in daily life, we can abide in him, never wanting to stray from him or to forget him. We can have such a personal relationship with Jesus that our every instinct becomes the desire to think on him and to conduct ourselves as we think he wants us to conduct ourselves.

The people in our Gospel story seek Jesus because they had their fill of the bread he supplied them. This is natural; this is understandable. Perhaps they seek him because they desire more bread or simply because they are curious about whether Jesus will do another wonder. This is all natural. But Jesus himself seems to want more from us. He wants a personal relationship with us. He wants our love. He wants our lives. And to him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.