



“Do You Love Me?”
Scripture – John 21:15-17
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 5, 2019

In a few moments, we will get to our Scripture reading for today, but first, I would like to engage you in a brief dialogue. I would like to hear from some of you your answer to this question. I’m not searching for one specific answer. There is no one right answer to this question.

Here is the question: How do you know if someone loves you? [Responses: They tell you. They show you].

What has someone done for you or you have done for another that says, “I love you?” [Responses: Taking time to write you and saying why you are important to them. Listening to you. Being patient with you when you are being difficult. Loving you even when you screw up. Forgiving you even when you inflicted pain on them. Standing by you when times are tough].

There is a wonderful scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* when Tevye asks his wife Golde, “Do you love me?”

They are in their tiny house. She is cooking and straightening things up, and she responds, “Do I what?”

The two sing their responses back and forth to one another. Tevye: “Do you love me?”

Golde: Do I love you? With our daughters getting married, and this trouble in the town, you’re upset, you’re worn out, go inside, go lie down! Maybe it’s indigestion.”

Tevye is irrepensible: “Do you love me?”

She replies, “You’re a fool.”

He says, “I know...But do you love me?”

Golde sings, “Do I love you? For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked your cow. After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?”

Tevye says, “My father and mother said we’d learn to love each other, and now I’m asking, Golde, Do you love me?”

She replies, “Do I love him? For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him, fought with him and starved with him; for twenty-five years my bed is his, if that’s not love, what is?”

“Ahh,” he says, “You DO love me.”

The gospel lectionary reading for this third Sunday of Easter tells of Jesus appearing to seven of the disciples shortly after his resurrection. Peter and six other disciples are unsure of their next steps, so they return to what they were doing when Jesus first called them to become his followers. They have returned to fishing on the Sea of Galilee.

John paints the scene for us. The disciples have shoved off from shore in their boat and are night fishing. In first century Palestine they did not possess fiberglass fishing rods and state-of-the-art spinning reels. They fished with nets made of linen with small stone sinkers attached to the edge of the net to make it sink.

John writes that the fishermen have been skunked. They’ve not caught a single fish by the time ribbons of light have begun to appear in the morning sky. As the darkness lifts, Jesus appears on the shore and calls out to them – they’re about 100 yards offshore. He tells them to cast their net on the opposite side of the boat, and when they do, they catch such an enormous school of fish that the net is in danger of shredding. The disciples realize it is Jesus who called to them and they sailed for shore with their bountiful catch.

When they reach the shallow water, they see that Jesus has a charcoal fire burning and is preparing breakfast for them.

That brings us to the three verses of our focus, John 21:15-17:

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ A second time Jesus said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter replied, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ Jesus said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And Peter replied, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

Why do you think Jesus asked Peter not once or twice, but three times, “Do you love me?”

Backing up a bit, you remember that after Jesus was betrayed by Judas on the Mount of Olives, he was hauled in front of the authorities for a life or death decision. Peter tried to blend in with the crowd outside of where Jesus was being questioned hoping to learn of Jesus’ fate. The gospel writer says that Peter and others were standing around a charcoal fire warming themselves when a woman said to Peter, “You’re not one of Jesus’ followers, are you?”

Peter replied, “Who me? Never met him.”

Three times, onlookers stared at Peter and asked if he was a follower of Jesus and three times Peter denied knowing him. So it comes as no great surprise that after his death and resurrection, Jesus would come looking for Peter.

A colleague (Debie Thomas) says that when she was growing up, whenever she “failed in some way, trivial or terrible,” the worst part was neither getting caught nor being punished. The worst part was that her family “did not practice restoration... (No one) ever found their way to a language of grace. She never heard, ‘I forgive you,’ or, ‘It’s okay,’ or ‘I still love you.’ Instead, she felt abandoned to a thick, damning silence. The family withdrew affection, avoided eye contact, shut down authentic conversation, and rendered the offense and the offender invisible... Eventually the ice thawed and life returned to a bruised normal. But the wound continued to fester below the surface. A thick, hot shame filled her body and assured her that she was unfixable and unlovable.”¹

After Peter denied Jesus three times, he must have felt an enormous sense of shame. Perhaps he felt unfixable and unlovable.

Weeks earlier, Peter was enthusiastic when he declared to Jesus, “You are the Messiah!” However, when danger filled the air, Peter murmured, “I do not know him.”

So, when Jesus appeared to Peter on the shore – once again standing around a charcoal fire – Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to overcome his three denials with three opportunities to reaffirm his devotion. And after each affirmation, Jesus told Peter how to express his love. If *love* for Jesus and not *denial* of Jesus is the authentic Peter, here is how to show it: Tend my sheep.”

Peter represents us. Sometimes we are trustworthy and faithful and virtuous. Other times we are unreliable, cowardly, and self-centered. And, yet, God still calls us like Jesus called Peter: “Tend my sheep.”

Now, I understand God calling Dietrich Bonhoeffer to stand up to the Nazis. He had a keen intellect and he was fearless. It makes sense that God would whisper in the ear of Mother Teresa to minister to the poor of Calcutta. She had a heart of compassion for the most destitute. I can see why God would nudge Martin Luther King, Jr. to speak a prophetic word to our nation to overcome the sin of racism. He was a passionate and persuasive orator. But for each one of them, there are millions of us. For each mighty apostle, a gazillion featherweights! This is why this exchange between Peter and Jesus is so vital for us to understand. God does not expect us to be perfect. Messing up does not disqualify us from future opportunities. Most importantly, it is not essential we do something monumental to make a difference.

Dr. King said, “Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve...You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace – a soul generated by love.”

Jesus asks each of us, “Do you love me?” If our answer is “Yes” he calls on us to validate it by caring for others. So it’s important for us to sharpen our focus and tune our ears, because opportunities to heal others with love will arise.

Her comment was nearly imperceptible – no caps, bold font, or underline.

In her ocean of words it nearly fell unnoticed;
like a crumb that dropped to the floor
or a Cheerio that missed the bowl.

Was she even aware of her words or did they just spill out
like a brimming cup of coffee that was bound to dribble over.

She motored on to mundane matters
as if to pull you off the scent,
but your mind doubled back to those fragile words
that exposed her pain.

Will you deny you picked up her plea and just release it to the wind?
Or will you pursue her dim disclosure of her distress?

The Spirit of the Divine is whispering, “Do you love me?”
Seize this opening to certify you do!

NOTES

1. Debie Thomas, “You Know Everything,” Journey with Jesus, posted April 28, 2019.

Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Lord's Supper – Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, as we prepare to share the Lord's Supper, help us to be fully present in this moment. Enable us to calm the clatter in our minds so that we may focus on our bond with you – your love that embraces us and seeks the best for us; your wisdom that helps us separate what is right and true from the imposters that promise fulfillment but cannot deliver; and your power to transform us into people who are more Christ-like in thought, word and deed.

As we eat this bread and drink this cup, we pray that you will
fill us with joy and compassion,
inspire us to be grateful and generous,
and create in us a deep thirst for justice and peace.

Gracious God, we offer ourselves to you with gratitude as we share this joyful feast. May we embrace the opportunities that come our way and may we demonstrate our love for you by reaching out in love for others.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.