

Do You Love Me?
Based on John 21:1-23
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In the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye asks his wife Golde, “Do you love me?” Her response is quite comical.

She says, “For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, and milked the cow.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Tevye replies. “Do you love me?”

“You’re a fool,” Goldie responds.

“I know,” Tevye declares. “But do you love me?”

There is a similar exchange in the gospel today between Jesus and Simon Peter. Jesus asks, “Simon, do you love me?” Simon is much more forthright than Golde. Simon declares, “You know I love you, Lord.” Jesus seems to be as skeptical as Tevye because he asks Simon *three* times, “Do you love me?”

The Greek word for love that Jesus uses is *agape*: “Peter, do you *agape* me?” *Agape* is the greatest kind of love – that unique self-giving kind of love that Jesus offered us upon the cross. *Agape* love means putting everything and everyone before ourselves. It is sacrificing our own wants and desires for the sake of the greater good.

The way Simon responds is telling. Simon responds, “Lord, you know I love you.” But in the original Greek language, Simon doesn’t say, “Lord you know I *agape* you.” The word Simon uses for love is *phileo* – the kind of love that two friends have for one another. It is a less-demanding kind of love.

Phileo is a caring kind of love that you show when you feel like it. *Agape* love is the giving of one’s self at all times, whether it is convenient or not. Whereas *phileo* love has the best of intentions, *agape* love is already at work, doing specific acts of kindness to make a difference in someone’s life.

Have you ever pulled that same kind of word play with Jesus? Sure, Jesus, I’ll follow you, but I’m kind of busy right now. Let me pencil you in for next Tuesday. Sure, Jesus, I am gratefully for all you have given me, but I had some unexpected bills this month, so I will start up my pledge again next month. Sure, Jesus, I will feed the hungry and clothe the naked, but I just donated a bunch of stuff, so let someone else help this go around. In so many ways, we define Christian love on our terms rather than modeling our life after the *agape*, self-giving love of Jesus.

Think about it: Simon Peter doesn't have the best track record in the gospel of John. When he asks to walk on the water with Jesus, Simon Peter ends up sinking because of his lack of faith. When Jesus is arrested before his crucifixion, Simon Peter denies even knowing Jesus three times in order to escape arrest himself.

I wonder: Is that the reason Jesus asks Simon Peter *three* times, "Do you love me?" Simon's three-fold affirmation of "Yes, Lord, you know I love you" seems to cancel out his three denials earlier in the story. I suggest this because the setting is exactly the same. In both stories we find ourselves around a charcoal fire. The first fire was in the high priest's courtyard, where Simon Peter sat to keep warm. When people accuse Simon of hanging around Jesus, he forcefully denies that he even knows Jesus three times, in fear that he, too, will be arrested and killed.

Then in the gospel today, we once again find ourselves around a charcoal fire – this time on the beach. As Jesus shares breakfast with his disciples, Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?"

It is as if Jesus is wiping the slate clean for Simon. Jesus transforms the three denials of Peter into three affirmations of love. The fact that Simon Peter, who failed Jesus in a BIG way, is given a second chance is AWESOME NEWS for us who in our own way has let Jesus down.

Despite all of our shortcomings, Jesus says, "I still love you and I call you to be my witnesses in the world." Jesus says, "Despite your self-centered ways, I believe you can still make a difference in this world by telling and showing others about the love and grace of God. Treat the lost sheep of this world the same way I have treated you. Care for them just as I cared for you." For Jesus, love always translates into action. To love means to act. To **not** act means to deny the will of God for the world.

There is something else intriguing about the question Jesus asks: "Do you love me more than these?" What is Jesus referring by *these*? Some scholars take it to mean, "Do you love me more than these other disciples love me?" Unfortunately, the original Greek is just as ambiguous as the English. I believe what Jesus means is this: Do you love me more than you love all these things – these people, these fishing boats, these surroundings? In other words, Jesus asks Simon Peter (and us) flat out, "Are you willing to make significant changes in your life – to leave your comfort zone, to take risks, to live by faith, and to follow commands that the world deems impractical and outdated? Because if you're not," Jesus says, "your heart is still not ready to follow me. Your heart is not prepared for the *agape* way of life. Only when you are willing to choose me over everything else," Jesus says, "is your heart ready to follow me."

I did some checking. Nowhere in the gospels do the disciples catch fish without Jesus' help. It doesn't mean that the disciples didn't ever catch fish by themselves. The Bible simply doesn't record it. Until Jesus comes along, the disciples are always

fish-less. But when Jesus comes onto the scene, the nets overflow to the point of ripping.

I think the point is clear: without Jesus, all seems lost. Without Jesus, we are unproductive, floating out to sea with no bearing, no purpose, no destination. But when we invite Jesus to be our navigator in life – when we are willing to let Jesus take the wheel – powerful, miraculous things begin to happen in our lives.

This is what Jesus means when he says, “Follow me.” Jesus instructs us to allow him to take the wheel and for us to hang on for an incredible ride. To be able to pry our own hands off of the wheel takes bold courage; it takes a leap of faith. It takes a willingness to allow the love of Christ to change our hearts.

So it is no wonder that before Jesus instructs his disciples to follow him, he asks pointed the question, “Do you love me?” “Do you love me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Am I the ultimate concern in your heart? Or do too many other things reside there, crowding me out?”

In the last few verses of John’s Gospel, we encounter the very essence of the Christian gospel: the Lord Almighty is a God of love and mercy. No matter how awful our sins, no matter how stubborn our heart, no matter how strong our indifference is to studying God’s Word and growing in our faith, our God is always extending his arms of forgiveness, calling us back to the safety of the Great Shepherd’s fold. That is what Jesus does for Simon Peter in the Gospel today. And that is what Jesus is willing to do for us. The second letter to Timothy puts it this way: “Even when we are unfaithful, Christ remains faithful.”

A young boy was riding in the car with his mom on a rainy afternoon. The boy commented how the rain is like our sins and the windshield wipers are like God wiping our sins away. The mother was amazed at her son’s comment and decided to take it one step further. “Do you notice how the rain never lets up, how it just keeps on coming and coming? What does that tell you?” the mother asked. The boy thought for a minute and then replied, “We keep on sinning, and God just keeps wiping us clean!”

Hear the good news: Things in our past, the things of the present are never so terrible that we are excluded from the grace of God. On the contrary, Christ meets us where we are and invites us to come and dine around his table where our sins are forgiven and we are nourished for our true calling – our life’s purpose – to go out and to love the world just as Christ first loved us. The way in which we care for the lost sheep of the world is a direct reflection of our love and devotion for Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Do you love me? Jesus asks. Do you truly love me? It is all too easy to answer that question the way Simon did. “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.” My prayer is that we

will not only say those words with our lips, but we will make those words our personal mission statement and live them out in our daily lives.

As the song states, they will know we are Christians... BY OUR LOVE.

May it be so in your life and in mine. Amen.