

DO YOU LOVE ME?

John 21.15-17

May 21, 2017, Music Sunday

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Intro to *The Gift of Charity* (I Corinthians 13)

Perhaps the most famous passage on love in the Bible is I Corinthians 13. In the King James version, I think in order to emphasize that love is an *action*, “love” has been translated “charity,” as is the case with this next piece.

In our day, however, “charity” might make us think of a check you write. And it is true that financial help can be an act of love.

But if charity becomes an act of privilege – money we pay to absolve our guilt for creating and *benefiting* from a system that keeps other people in chronic poverty; if “charity” is the money we pay to make sure nothing changes; if “charity” is the wall we build to keep other people at a distance -- then charity is, of course, the opposite of love. Love doesn't make other people the objects of our pity. It inspires partnerships to do the work of compassion.

Charity is love at work if it is building relationships that help us care for the world. And that's important because the bottom line of this text is that three things endure: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is the actions of love.

The Gift of Charity – J. Rutter

Reflection for Music Sunday

Surrounded as we are this morning by the music of love, I am reminded that this Music Sunday is still in the Easter season. And one of the most poignant Easter stories in John 21 revolves around this question: “Do you love me?”

Peter has gone back to his old life of fishing after the death of Jesus. And a resurrected Jesus meets him on the beach and asks: “Do you love me?”

Peter says: “Yes. You know that I do.”

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus says.

Now I have to confess that I can never read or hear this story in John 21 without my mind going immediately to Broadway. Because I can hear Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* singing: “Do you love me?”

And his wife, Golde, sings back: “Do I what? For 25 years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house.”

“Yes, yes,” Tevye says, “But Golde ... Do you love me?”

And I have to tell you that I think some of us good church folk might often play Golde in that conversation. We hear the question “do you love me?” and we say: “Do I what? For 25 years I’ve fed your sheep, paid my tithes, I can sing those old hymns in my sleep.”

“Yes, yes,” Jesus might say to us as he did to Peter, “But do you love me?”

Now I understand if that question might make us a little uncomfortable. I know some of those folks who claim to love Jesus and are just plain mean to everyone else.

I keep a cartoon from the *New Yorker* at my desk where God is looking at the world and God says to an angel standing nearby: “I’m starting to prefer the ones who *don’t* believe in me.”

We had the great grandson of Walter Rauschenbusch here with us last Sunday and Walter, the great Baptist preacher and social activist, said way back at the turn of the century that some of the folks who went off to revivals to learn about loving Jesus came back worse human beings than they were when they left.

So I understand if this “do you love me?” question Jesus is asking makes us uncomfortable.

But I think I need to remind you that the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures both seem to agree that the greatest commandment is to “love God with all your heart and with all your hearth with all your mind and with all your strength *and* to love your neighbor as yourself.”

This greatest passage about love in the Bible that we just heard, begins: “If I speak with the tongues of humans or of angels – if I sing like an angel; if I give all my possessions to the poor – if I feed your sheep; if I give my body to be destroyed – if I become a martyr; but *do not* have love, it all counts for nothing.”

So it sounds like this “do you love me?” question, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us feel, is an important one.

The question, first, is not “are you feeding my sheep?” The first question is “do you love me?” and if you do, the expression of that love is the investment you make in caring for each other and the world.

Our old friend Walter Rauschenbusch, writing about mysticism, says: *The more we approach pure Christianity, the more will the Christian signify a person who loves people with a religious passion and excludes none.*

Or, as a young Irishman, Peter Rollins, says in our time:

God is found in love itself ... the very act of loving brings us into immediate relationship with the deepest truth of all ... God is the name we give to that way of living in which we experience the world as worthy of living for, fighting for, dying for.

So when people – hungry people and lost people and lonely people and broken people – cry out: “Does anybody care? Do you love me?” We don’t have to figure out who is asking.

According to Jesus, “do you love me?” is the God question and the human question all rolled into one.

And if that’s true – that the “do you love me” question is the God question and the human question all rolled into one -- think about the incredible power every one of you has.

It doesn’t matter how young or old you are. It doesn’t matter how rich or poor. It doesn’t matter how pious or how much you struggle with the whole idea of God.

Each of you has this amazing power to say to someone as genuinely as you can and no matter how imperfectly it may be: “I love you.”

You know that power. I hope to God you have experienced that power that can change your life and change another person’s life and can change the world.

You have that power.

So today, if you hear that voice asking: “do you love me?” well, for God’s sake and for your sake, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, (Abingdon, originally published in 1917), pp. 96 & 108.
Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To believe is human to doubt, divine* (Howard Books, 2011), pp. 120 & 123.

Blessing from Rob Bell's *Love Wins*

May you experience this vast
expansive, infinite, indestructible love
that has been yours
all along.

May you discover that this love
is as wide as the sky
and as small as the cracks in your heart
no one knows about.

And may you know
deep in your bones
that love
wins.