

If you love me ...

John 21:9 & 15-17

Easter III, April 10, 2016

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John 21:9 & 15-17 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread ... ¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He 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 he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.

Sermon

[From anthem] *Where charity and love are, God is there.*

I hope that's *this* place. I've heard enough about God in other places to know that I shouldn't take for granted the presence of charity and love if I find it.

And I hope I haven't yet worn out those lines from Dr. King ...

At times we need to know that the Lord is a God of justice. When slumbering giants of injustice emerge in the earth, we need to know that there is a God of power who can cut them down like the grass ... But there are also times ... When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment ... [and] we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance.

That's the place Peter found himself that early morning on the beach. Peter, for whom the vision of the God of justice glowed so brightly. Peter, who was ready to pick up the sword if need be. Peter, who had promised to follow Jesus no matter what.

And then all hell broke loose.

He had hung around for a while after they arrested Jesus and maybe it was the shock or the disappointment that made him deny he even knew the man. Maybe he realized he really didn't know *this* man – not this person who was beaten and mocked and destroyed. That wasn't the Jesus he thought he knew. Perhaps it wasn't the Jesus he thought he loved.

And then they crucified Jesus and even the stories about his resurrection didn't help very much.

By then Peter was dead inside.

But this is another one of those resurrection stories.

And I don't think we should blame Peter for going back to the life he knew. Perhaps fishing was the only thing that made sense to him now. But he fished all night with his friends and didn't catch a single fish. By morning, maybe he was asking himself just what kind of a loser are you anyway? Not much of a disciple and now you can't even catch fish.

Whatever Peter knew of a God of power and justice, what he needed now was someone who loved him, cared for him, understood him, and would give him another chance.

And then there is this voice calling from the beach, telling them to throw their nets out on the right side of the boat – that's the "starboard" side. It was ridiculous but why not? And they did. And their nets, the story says, were full of fish.

Peter thinks he recognizes that voice and they all scramble to the beach and discover that this stranger, who looks a lot like Jesus, has already made breakfast for them.

After they are done eating, the question comes: "Do you love me? Do you love me more than these, Peter? Do you love me more than your idea of me? If you love me, Peter, feed my sheep."

Now I have to be honest with you that every time I read this story and the line, “Do you love me?” what I really hear is the voice of Tevye from *Fiddler on the Roof*, “Do you love me?” And, of course, Golde’s response, “Do I what?”

Perhaps Broadway is not always the best commentary for the Bible but I honestly can’t help it when it comes to this story. The question put to Peter and the question Tevye puts to his wife share the same context. The world has changed. That old world they both knew is coming apart – it’s dying. And the question is essentially a resurrection question: Will you give life a second chance?

“It’s a new world,” Tevye says, “So, Golde, do you love me?”

“Do I love you?” Golde says:

*For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes
Cooked your meals, cleaned your house
Given you children, milked the cow
After twenty-five years, why talk about love now?”*

I imagine Peter saying to Jesus, “Do I love you?
For all those years, I stayed with you,
worked for you, prayed with you,
believed in you, wrangled crowds for you.
For all those years I fed your sheep.”

But Tevye and Jesus are relentless, “Yes, yes, but do you love me?”

Golde stops long enough to ask herself:

*Do I love him?
For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him
Fought with him, starved with him
Twenty-five years my bed is his
If that’s not love, what is?*

“Then you love me?” Tevye says.

“I suppose I do.”

And then together they sing:
It's doesn't change a thing
But even so
After twenty-five years
It's nice to know

I want to suggest this morning that this interaction between Tevye and Golde is instructive for us. And, perhaps, it changes everything.

Jesus doesn't say to Peter, if you feed my sheep, then I'll know that you really love me. Like Tevye, he simply asks: "Do you love me?" It's only after Peter says, "You know that I love you," that Jesus says, "feed my sheep."

If Jesus were to show up among us and put this question to us, I think we might be like Golde, "What do you mean, 'Do you love me?' For almost a hundred and fifty years we have been feeding your sheep."

And perhaps Jesus would say to us: "That's not what I asked. Do you love me?"

We are quick to say that the great commandment is to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

But if we are pushed to say what that means, I think we are likely to say: Well, we offer an array of spiritual activities and we do our best to feed the hungry and advocate for justice.

And that's great. Although I would remind you that the famous love chapter in I Corinthians 13 begins: "If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels ... If I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains ... If I give away all my possessions, and I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

I think Jesus and Teyve are asking the same question. It's a question that does not start with: How good are you at feeding sheep? It starts with: "Do you love me?"

If we fail this generation of the "spiritual-but-not-religious" it will be because, when they ask us what it is we love and what we have a passion for, our answer is a laundry list of how good we are at feeding sheep.

If what we have to offer the world is a cold and heartless political correctness or a belligerent and tunnel vision of justice, then we should not be surprised if we, as a spiritual community, are dead in a matter of years.

What people are hungry for is love stories.

Several years ago, a friend of mine – an Episcopal Deacon – gave me a book by Flora Slosson Wuellner. It is her own resurrection story drawn, in part, from this text in John 20 and 21.

In the middle of a funeral service I was leading, she writes, I suddenly realized I did not believe what I was saying. It had been a tragic and traumatic death: an eighteen-year-old boy – an only child, college bound that fall, enthusiastic member of our little Chicago church – killed in an auto accident while riding to a church camp where he was a summer counselor. I spoke of the limitless love of God, the closeness of the Comforter, the life eternal within God's heart as I looked at the faces of his parents, our church members, his weeping school friends; but as I spoke, a grim realization grew within me that I didn't really believe what I was saying. God's love, closeness, and power to comfort suddenly seemed so dim and unreal.

Through the rest of the book she writes about how she had gotten so caught up in feeding the sheep that she lost track of what it was to love God and to be loved. If her spiritual life was going to be resurrected, she had to answer the question for herself: "Do you love me?"

Do you find yourself hungry for that kind of presence described by the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel as the One who says:

*I myself will tend my flock,
I myself pen them in their fold ...
I will search for the lost,
recover the straggler,
bandage the hurt,
strengthen the sick,
leave the healthy and the strong to play,
and give them all their proper food. [Ezekiel 34.11-16, NEB]*

If that's the One we are learning to love, then of course those are the stories we have to tell; of course we know that there is someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and is willing to give us another chance; and of course we dedicate ourselves to feeding and tending the sheep.

Look, I know there are all kinds of deadly forms of spirituality out there that claim to love God and the world. One of the most damaging forms for me has been the kind that claims to love the sinner but hate the sin. All I know is that if I ever wanted to be raised out of that death, I needed to discover – or re-discover – what it is I love.

It's a new world. That old world – glorious though it may have been – is passing away. And Jesus – and Tevye – want to know: “Do you love me?”

And your answer to that question could change everything.

So today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Lyrics to “Do you love me?” are available at www.stlyrics.com. Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Feed My Shepherds* (Upper Room Books, 1998), p.17ff.