

## Jesus is asking... (How) Do You Love Me?

After the Resurrection, Jesus appeared to seven disciples along the North shore of the Sea of Galilee. (Jn 21)

The encounter centers on Jesus questioning Peter three times – each question apparently seeking confirmation of Peter’s love. (Jn 21: 15-17)

The questions sound simple enough: ‘Do you love me?’

But was Jesus asking... or teaching?

With this post I wanted to focus on one particular story of St. Peter as told in the Gospel of John, Chapter 21, and talk about a meaning of which most people are unaware. This Chapter describes a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to seven disciples that were night fishing on the Sea of Tiberius (Galilee). The seven are not far from land and Jesus beckons them to shore. There, they see Jesus next to a charcoal fire and share a breakfast of bread and fish. Given the similarity of language of breaking bread, there is a strong Eucharistic inference to the feeding of the 5000 in Jn 6 and the Last Supper. The story continues and here I want to focus on the dialog between Jesus and Peter contained in verses 15-17:

*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.” He 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.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” 17 He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved 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.” (Jn 21:15-17)*

We see Jesus asking Peter three times if he loves Him. It must be noted that a charcoal fire is mentioned only twice in the New Testament, here in Jn 21 and also in during the story (see Jn 18:18) of Peter denying Jesus three times. It seems clear that Jesus’ three questions is an opportunity for Peter to affirm his love for Him in contrast to the three times he denied Jesus outside of the high priest’s house. I think most people agree with this interpretation. It points out Peter’s human weakness under the fear and pressure of Jesus’ arrest, but later demonstrates a new strength and personal restitution. That is all well and good, but a richer meaning is hidden in the actual Greek words used in the Septuagint Gospel.

First we need a quick reminder of the Greek language as far as the meaning of some words is concerned. I don’t know Greek, nor do I pretend to in any way, but I’ll try to communicate what I’ve learned from other sources.

The Greeks understood that the notion of human love is complex and nuanced. To communicate these differences, the language uses different words for love depending on the type of love involved.

For example, the type of love that is purely physical in nature, perhaps even lustful, is described as 'eros.' In English we derive the word erotic from this Greek base. Another type of love is that feeling that two brothers might have for one another – certainly strong, but based on family ties, not physical attraction. The Greeks used the word 'phileo' to describe this type of love. Remember Philadelphia as the city of brotherly love and you'll get the idea.

Finally, we come to that last type of love and that is a true eternal love, one that is unconditional and based on self-giving. The Greek word 'agapao' is used to differentiate this true, self-giving love from the others. In English we often use the term Agape love in this context.

Okay, now lets revisit the Gospel of John but this time I'll insert the specific Greek word [in brackets] just prior to the English translated 'love' used in our modern Bible. [The reason that the original Greek is important is that both Jesus and the New Testament authors used the Greek version of the Old Testament. As such, examining the Greek gives us better insight into the best interpretation.]

*15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you [agapao] love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I [phileo] love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you [agapao] love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I [phileo] love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you [phileo] love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you [phileo] love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I [phileo] love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." (Jn 21:15-17)*

Now take a look carefully at the words for love that Jesus used. In the first question, Jesus asks Peter if he [AGAPE – true] loves Him. But Peter responds by saying that yes, he [PHILEO – brotherly] loves Him. The same language is used in the second question by both Jesus and Peter.

But now in the third go around, Jesus changes His question. He now asks if Peter [PHILEO – brotherly] loves Him, to which Peter again affirms his brotherly love for Christ.

So what do we make of this? I think two conclusions can be drawn.

1) It seems like Peter didn't really understand what the true Agape type of love was really about. At this point, Peter and the other disciples hardly recognized Christ and didn't really understand the Resurrection. Remember that Pentecost and the power of

strength of the Holy Spirit is yet to come. The disciples, even Peter, didn't understand the gift of the Cross.

2) It seems that Jesus, fully intended an Agape loving relationship with Peter, as evidenced by the use of that word in the first two questions. However, by the third question, Jesus is apparently willing to settle for the only type of love that Peter is yet capable of giving – a simple friendship. The desire of God and our final destination is revealed. Unfortunately, so is our limited and inadequate human nature.

The Answer...

Jesus does not desire from us simply a personal relationship as Lord and Savior. Jesus wants with us an intimate relationship of agape love.

But agape love, that love that leads to eternal life, is by its very nature, giving and reciprocal.

In the hands of our Redeemer, this agape love involved a walk to Calvary. He gave His life to us on the cross and He continues to give his Body and Blood to us in the Eucharist. The Cross is truly the gift that that keeps on giving.

But we are also called to walk in agape love, to pick up our cross and follow Him. We also must make the choice of total surrender of self for the good of the other. As Christ gave His life to us, we must also imitate Him and give our life in return. That's the way love works after all.

Jesus wasn't asking Peter if he loved Him, He was using the Gospel to tell us how to love. Christ is drawing us to an intimate, spiritual and physical, Sacramental relationship where we become one in His Body.

Peter didn't seem to quite understand the question, but thank God we can now understand the message.