

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus annoys the disciple Simon Peter by asking him three times in succession, "Do you love me?" Think about the word "love." All of us use the word "love" all the time, and we probably are not especially precise in how we use it.

If, for example, I say that "I love boating," or "I love reading," or "I love my wife," or "I love chocolate," or "I love God," or "I love dogs," or "I love" ... all kinds of different things, are all these expressions of love to be understood as equal and referring to the same level of depth and intensity? Of course not. Presumably my love of my wife is of a very different nature than my love of chocolate.

I doubt that I am the only person who tosses around the word "love" rather haphazardly and without giving much thought to what exactly I mean by it. How about you? Are you inclined to define "love" rather broadly and without paying much attention to what exactly you are professing when you say that you "love" someone or something? I will come back to our use of "love" in a few minutes.

We see in today's gospel lesson that the story of Jesus and his disciples, a story that began with Jesus calling out to them on a seashore several years before, has finally come full circle when, in the days following Christ's resurrection, Jesus once again beckons to them from a seashore. The disciples, filled with disappointment now that their time with Jesus suddenly has ended, had returned to their roots as fishermen. Back when Jesus began his ministry, he had been walking along the seashore when he encountered two fishermen, Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, as they were casting their nets in search of the day's catch. Jesus encouraged them to put down their nets and to become fishers of people, which they did. Shortly thereafter, Jesus discovered James and John also working as fishermen. He called them as well to follow him, and they did.

Those fishermen gave up their families, their communities, and their employment to join Jesus on an incredible journey. They traveled throughout the countryside and watched Jesus cure the sick, heal the lame, and return sight to the blind. All the while, Jesus was instructing those first four disciples along with others who joined his ministry later, how to invite people into a different way of life. Jesus demonstrated by his own words and actions how to inspire people to a way of love and to care for the marginalized and suffering. Jesus showed them what "love" looks like.

We are not told how much time had passed, but at some point after Jesus was resurrected from his grave and appeared to the disciples in that locked room in Jerusalem where they were hiding in fear of also being arrested and killed, the disciples left Jerusalem and returned to their home in Galilee. They returned to the comfort of the familiar and the safety of the countryside away from the terrible forces that Jesus had confronted in the city: away from the chief priests and Pharisees in the temple, and of course the Roman governor and his soldiers.

The disciples were home again, but you get the sense that given all that taken place during their time with Jesus, they did not quite know what to do with themselves now that he was gone from their lives. But they must live, so they returned to what they knew best. They went fishing. However, that did not work out well for them either, because after a long night on the water toiling with their nets they have nothing to show for their labours. No fish were caught.

As dawn broke, the disciples see a stranger standing on the shore next to a small cooking fire he appears to have made. The stranger calls out to them across the water and suggests the fishermen do something very odd. "Cast the net to the right side of the boat" he says, "and you will find some fish." Fishermen are by nature persistent, so they follow the stranger's advice, and amazingly their net suddenly was full to bursting with fish.

Only then does Peter recognize the stranger, because he has witnessed similar miracles before, like the time on a hillside where some five thousand hungry people were gathered, and he watched Jesus bless and break a miniscule offering of bread and fish until all were fed. Or that time at a wedding in Cana when water was turned into wine of the highest quality. It is then that Peter recognizes the resurrected Christ standing on the shore. When one

of the other disciples shouts, “It is the Lord!” Peter jumps from the boat and dashes to where Jesus is waiting to serve them a breakfast of fish and bread cooked over the charcoal fire. We have all heard about the “Last Supper.” Well, this event has been called the “First Breakfast.”

It is the event that turned the disciples away from their grief and confusion over the death of Jesus, towards a new life of purpose and mission empowered by their confidence in the comforting presence of the resurrected Christ in their lives.

But first, Jesus has some very specific business to take up with Peter. It always bears repeating that Peter, in so many of the gospel stories, is a stand-in for us. You will recall that before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus told Peter that he would deny Jesus three times, and sadly, his prediction came true. When Peter was accosted by bystanders in the hours immediately before Jesus’ crucifixion, Peter repeatedly denied even knowing Jesus. Peter was among the disciples who fled behind locked doors out of fear and self-preservation.

Now, on the seashore following breakfast, Jesus speaks to Peter directly: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Jesus asks three times, and three times Peter affirms his love for Jesus – sort of.

I asked you a few minutes ago to think about your use of the word “love.” In the English language, “love” is the only word for “love.” But when Jesus and Peter spoke Aramaic, which in turn was translated into Greek, the language in which our holy scriptures were first written, there were several words that meant “love,” each with a different meaning.

Jesus asked Peter, “Do you *agape* me?” The Greek word *agape* refers to the kind of love that is life-transforming. It is a self-giving love that sacrifices its own needs for the good of others. *Agape* is the kind of love Jesus showed us on the cross. It is the kind of love that God has for us, and God seeks from us in return.

In response to Jesus’ question, Peter does not say “Yes, Lord, you know that I *agape* you.” Instead, Peter answers: “Yes Lord, you know that I *philia* you.” The Greek word *philia* refers to “liking” or “having affection” for something.

You see the distinction: my love for my wife is *agape*; my fondness for chocolate is *philia*. Peter is in effect saying to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, I have affection for you. I like you, well enough.”

Two times in succession Jesus asks Peter, “Do you *agape* me?” and two times Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, I *philia* you.”

We should not be too hard on Peter. Perhaps he was just trying to be honest about the kind of love he was capable of giving Jesus in return. Having experienced the pain of losing Jesus to crucifixion, Peter was aware of the potential personal cost that can arise whenever you love another person an *agape* type of love.

In fairness to Peter’s lacklustre answer, we need to ask ourselves, what kind of love do we feel towards God? Is our love of God life transforming and wholly consuming? Or are we merely fond of God and feel some level of affection toward God that really is not life changing for us?

After Jesus’ question was asked and answered twice, a remarkable and beautiful thing happened that each one of us should embrace to take away from today’s worship service. The third time Jesus asks the question, he changes it up. He substitutes his word *agape*, for Peter’s word *philia*: “Peter,” Jesus asks, “do you *philia* me?”

You see what has happened? Jesus has demonstrated that he loves Peter enough to meet Peter where he is. If all Peter can offer is a *philia* sort of love, then that will suffice for now. Surely the same holds true for us. Jesus always loves us enough to meet us where we are.

If all we can offer God is a *philia* sort of love, then that will suffice for now. Jesus will meet us there and keep walking with us. Jesus always loves us enough to meet us where we are at any given time during our lives, because the perfect *agape* sort of love with which God loves us, will always make up for any of our deficiencies in love. **Amen.**

3 Easter

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