

“Peace Be With You”

May the grace and peace of Almighty God be with you.

As a child I would frequently visit the dump. It was much like a treasure hunt and I never knew what unique item I might find. I was one of the lucky children who lived close to the community dump and so I often got first pick of what people would leave behind. One of my greatest finds was a black and white 5 channel television. I still remember the excitement of dragging that television up the steep bank and then trying to balance it as I drove it home on the handle bars my bicycle. Of course, it was even more exciting when I took it to my bedroom, plugged it in, and discovered that it still worked! It initially only projected snowy static, but with the help of a coat hanger and a lot duck-tape, I managed to receive 3 channels. I loved that television, but my sister, who was in the room next to mine, despised it.

She liked to go to bed around 7:30, whereas I was a fan of staying up to watch late night television. Every night around 8 pm, she would knock on my door and ask me to turn the television down because she was trying to sleep. She would return again around 8:15, then 8:30, and by 9 pm, the knocking on my door turned into pounding on the wall as she screamed: “turn that television off! I am trying to sleep!” By that point I would usually turn the television off, wait for her to fall asleep, and then turn it back on to catch the tail end of Charlie’s Angels. But, from time to time, the sound of the television would wake her up, so she would once again make her way to my room and in an exasperated tone ask: “do you love me?” and before I could ever answer, she’d yell: “if you did you’d turn that television off!” Of course, I often responded in turn with: “if you love me, you’ll be quiet and let me watch my show in peace!”

This is somewhat comical sibling rivalry, but the story seems to coincide with Peter’s encounter of the risen Christ in today’s gospel narrative where Christ, on three occasions, asks a leading or rhetorical question, “Peter, do you love?”

Today’s text outlines the disciples’ third encounter with the risen Christ, but this time, just like when Mary Magdalene met Jesus at the tomb, the disciples are unable to recognize that they are in the presence of Christ. But perhaps the more interesting part of this narrative is the fact that instead of doing God’s work within the world, as Christ commanded them to do a few days earlier, the disciples, under Peter’s influence, have decided to go fishing. Their actions directly parallel the moment in which Christ first called these fishermen to come and follow him that he might make them into “fishers of people.” Now that Christ is seemingly missing from their lives, these fishermen appear to be reverting back into their old way of life, fishing the seas instead of “fishing for people.” Jesus does not reject their actions, instead, knowing that they did not catch a single fish, he offers insight and encouragement as to how they might improve their fishing experience by suggesting that they cast their net on the right side of the boat. This of course proves successful and they end up catching 153 fish. It is within this context that Jesus begins his dialogue with Peter. “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15) Jesus asks.

The text is unclear, but it seems that Jesus might be referring to the multitude of fish that they have caught. If this is the case, Christ is perhaps somewhat rhetorically inquiring why Peter would revert to his former occupation when he has been called by God to be “the rock” or the foundation of the church. Peter of course replies with: “yes Lord, you know that I love you.” To which Jesus responds: “feed my lambs.” And then the dialogue begins to get interesting as Christ again asks the question, not only once, but a total of three times.

“Peter, do you love me? – Yes Lord you know that I love you” (John 21:15)

“Peter, do you love me? – Yes Lord you know that I love you” (John 21:16)

“Peter, do you love me? – Lord you know everything; you know that I love you” (John 21:17)

There are a few potential explanations for the repetitive nature of this dialogue. This breakfast conversation on the beach of Tiberias is perhaps intended to reflect Peter’s threefold denial of Christ that precedes the crucifixion. Three moments of denial and three opportunities to more accurately express the convictions of his heart.

In addition to this however, the original language of the text also reveals that Jesus and Peter appear to be talking past each other. In English the word “love” is used to reference a large spectrum of emotions: I love ice cream, I love my cat, I love God, but when I say these things, I am not referring to the same particular type of love. The love that I have for ice cream is not the same love that I have for God and so on. In English, we have a single word for love that has a multitude of somewhat related definitions. Whereas in the ancient Greek language, there are more than 7 unique words that represent different types of love; five of which are used within the context of the Bible. What we miss in the English translation of today’s text is the fact that Jesus and Peter are talking about different types of love. Jesus begins by asking: Peter, do you *agape* me? *Agape* refers to the highest form of love that is given both to and from God, so Jesus is essentially asking: Peter, do you have God’s love for me? But Peter responds: Yes Lord, you know that I *philia* you. *Philia* refers to the type of love shared between friends, so Peter literally responds by saying: “Yes Lord, you know that I love you like a dear friend.” This exchange repeats a second time and then Jesus changes his tactic and meets on Peter’s terms by asking: “Peter, do you *philia* me? If so, feed my sheep.”

Jesus is perhaps trying to get Peter to acknowledge that he is called to share God’s love, the highest form of love. Whereas Peter is so caught up in his own love that he fails to recognize what Jesus is saying. Christ is simply living out the power of the resurrection, for the veil in the temple being torn represents the fact that the children of God now have direct access to live in and through God’s gifts of love and grace. It is what Luther refers to as the priesthood of all believers – where, through Christ, the people of God are equally given the opportunity and the responsibility of sharing God’s love and compassion – *agape*. The beauty of God’s love is that it meets people where they are at. God took on human form to meet us in our brokenness. That same Christ meets Peter amidst his denial, Thomas amidst his doubt, and Nathanael in spite of his disbelief that anything good could come from Nazareth (John 1:43-46). Instead of focusing on short comings or failures, Christ’s attention continues to primarily be on love. And Christ encourages both us and Peter to do the same.

A third level of complexity is mixed into the triad of Peter’s conversation with Christ. Christ’s first response is: Peter, if you love me, feed my Lambs. He then responds: if you love me, tend to my sheep, and in the third instance, Christ asks that Peter feed his sheep. Once again the Greek language reveals nuances that are not readily seen in the English translation of the text. What the Greek highlights is that Jesus is not only asking Peter, the foundation or representative of the church, to care for his followers (the sheep), but to also care for the little lambs – or in Greek, those who are not yet sheep. Christ then is asking that Peter share God’s perfect love with not only those who consider themselves to be followers of Christ, but also those who are not yet believers. And that is both the gospel message of hope and the challenge amidst today’s text. God loves all people despite their unbelief, failure, or sin. God loves us while we are yet sinners and that same God calls us to love all people regardless of our differences. God calls us to love and care for those who we consider to be similar to us and also those whom we might consider to be different. Those who are within the body of the church and those who exist beyond the walls of the church.

For God’s *agape*, that highest form of love, is designed to flow both in and through the people of God so that

Christ's work on earth might continue until his return.

An entirely human understanding of love is sometimes incapable of seeing past the differences that create injustice and division. Both my sister and I thought that love meant getting what we wanted, but what I now see through the eyes of *agape* is that the highest form of love comes in the form of humility and servanthood. It is a love focused on equality and justice, a love that is filled mercy, compassion and grace. Amen.