

Sermon: Do You Love Me?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, May 1, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Do you love me? It's a simple question, asked by Jesus to his disciple Peter, in the post-resurrection encounter that was recorded in the Gospel of John 21.

The Gospel writer went into great details in setting up this scene. As usual, Peter was leading the pack; Thomas, Nathanael, James, John and two others were following. They were going fishing. They were tired of waiting, anxious of what was to come, not sure of their own roles in the post-resurrection reality. So they went back to the Sea of Galilee, back to their old fishing ground, picked up their old tools, and they went fishing.

So much had happened already to this band of former fishers turned disciples. Could they really go back? Backward from being the fishers of people to simply fishers of fish? Of course not, not that night, for they caught nothing.

Then at daybreak, Jesus stood on the shore, gave instruction to them on where and how to fish. The disciples at this point had yet to recognize the man who was instructing them, but nevertheless they followed, and they caught a huge haul—one and fifty-three fishes. This would be the second time that Jesus provided a multitude of fish for these men—the first time being in Luke 5. It is through such familiar words and acts that John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, remembered and said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”

Peter, once again acting in boldness and haste, cast everything aside, jumped into the water, and went straight to Jesus, leaving the others to pick up the haul. Upon reaching the shore, they saw a charcoal fire already set up, with fish on it, and bread nearby, in a scene that I often refer to as the BBQ on the beach. Jesus then took bread and gave it to them; he did the same with the fish, so the disciples ate with the Lord.

The Gospel writer informs us that it was the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. It was at this point, that Jesus put the question to Peter, only Peter, “**Do you love me more than these?**” Not sure if he was referring to the bread, the fish or his

friends. Peter replied, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus then said to him, "Feed my lambs."

There is a level of sophistication in the Greek language that is quite absent in English. The word 'love' in Greek is expressed through multiple ways. '**Ero**' in Greek expresses romantic love, a love between two lovers. It encompasses the physical act, or the so called 'erotic love'. But it also encompasses the psychological aspect of infatuation, a crush between two young lovers, the sort that we would call 'love in the first sight'. However, the word 'ero' does not actually appear in the New Testament.

We do find the word '**splaxna**' in the Bible, the love that comes from the guts. 'Splaxna' in Greek literally means guts or bowel. It is sometimes translated as affection. It expresses compassionate love, the kind of love that comes from a deep empathy, a real identification with the suffering of others. It moves us, physiologically speaking, to tears. When Jesus wept seemingly over the death of Lazarus, those nearby saw that as an expression of love, saying "See how he loved him!" (John 11:35-36).

Nevertheless, the word that is most common in the New Testament, that expresses love is '**filio**', the kind of love that binds people together. 'Filio' love is the most natural kind of love between friends, between kins and families. It is the kind of love that society needs in order to function. Without 'filio' love, human societal structure would simply fall apart. 'Filio' love expresses a simple reciprocal truth: I love you therefore I need you; and I need you therefore I love you. Inwardly, it is self-preservation, yet outwardly it is love.

Of course, the most important, theologically speaking, kind of love in the New Testament is '**agape**'. It is a sacrificial love that is mostly identified with God. 'Agape' love is always associated with the act of giving. For God so 'agape' the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16). God is the ultimate 'Agape'. Without God, we would not have known 'agape', we would not have experienced it, and we would never be called upon to give it. Yet with God, 'agape' is possible in us.

Perhaps the most complete description of the 'agape' love can be found in the exhortation of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, where 'agape' is patient; 'agape' is kind; 'agape' is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things,

believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. To cap it all—‘Agape’ never ends.

It should be noted when Jesus asked Peter, “**Do you love me?**”, he used the word ‘agape’. It should be noted equally that when Peter replied, he replied with ‘filio’. Three times Jesus asked Peter with ‘agape’, three times Peter replied with ‘filio’. The Gospel writer informs us that Peter felt hurt after the third time Jesus asked him the same question.

Biblical commentators have often alluded to this exchange as Jesus restoring Peter, after Peter denied knowing the Lord three times earlier. There is undoubtedly some truth to this, as one can never belittle the significance of forgiveness and reconciliation in this exchange. Yet, I am more in the school of thought that Jesus was in fact teaching Peter how to love—in the most self-denying, self-emptying and self-sacrificial way—just as the Lord has done on the cross.

If you truly love me (as in ‘agape’), then you must be prepared to deny yourself, to empty your own ambition, your own agenda. You must be prepared to sacrifice your vacation, comfortable home, familiar school, and well-paying job. You must be open to be stretched, in order to learn and to grow. You may be questioned by those close to you, those who love you. You may even be ridiculed, scoffed at as being self-righteous, or having your sanity questioned. You could even face persecution, from foes and friends alike, encounter unbearable loss, even the loss of your own life. Yet the Lord Jesus Christ is with you. Christ is before you, Christ is behind you, Christ is beneath you, above you, at your right and at your left. Christ is within you. With that, Jesus called on Peter, and calls on all of us, to simply ‘follow’.

Some of you met my father a few weeks ago. A kind, smiling old man with short and stocky stature. A few of you have commented on how much I look like him. I am glad and proud. However, he wasn’t always like this. In fact, I remember him to be an imposing and dominating presence. He was a well-respected doctor in Taiwan, used to have a band of nurses at his beck and call. His temper, impatience, and his fight with Mom was legendary (well maybe I am exaggerating a bit here, but when I was a child, I was truly terrified of him). When he finally retired and settled in Montreal, he treated others all the same, including those in the Presbyterian congregation my parents helped founded.

When I was called to ministry, to serve in my home congregation in Montreal, the search committee asked me a pointed question, concerning

how I might deal with the bitter and all encompassing fights my parents sometimes get into. I was at a loss as how to answer such a question. I think I said something about being called to serve the congregation, but not really able to do much about those fights of my parents.

It was during the first year at that pastoral charge, I had preached a sermon on the passage of Revelation 4-5, the same passage that was read earlier. I had explained the vision of the heavenly throne room, where four angelic creatures and twenty four elders assemble before the one seated on the throne. These twenty four elders have gotten off their own thrones, taken off their golden crowns, and prostrated themselves in a gesture of worship, singing, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." (Revelation 4:11) They represent all human powers and principalities, yielding before the one seated on the throne, and before the Lamb who is worthy to open the seal, triggering the beginning of the end, the apocalypse.

I then show the congregation this particular image, as printed on the cover of today's bulletin, what it could actually look like in that heavenly throne room. Somehow, the Spirit of God spoke to Dad, moved him to tears. He later confessed to me that he had been wearing that crown of pride and prestige for far too long, and he was now ready to take it off and place it before the Lord. He now understands what it means when his own son becomes a servant of the Lord, becoming the one serving the congregation, and Dad was ready to do his part.

I had not expected that reaction, had not prepared the sermon to address him, yet somehow the Spirit of God works in a mysterious way. Dad came to comprehend love as 'agape'. He may not have understood the extend by which he would later be called to give, to serve, and to love. Nevertheless, he knew his 'filio' love for his son would have to yield to a greater 'agape' love for God, and matched his action to his words.

Do you love me, asks Jesus? How will you reply? Feed my flock, commands the Lord. How will you follow?

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.