

Second Reformed Church, Pella  
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John 21:15-19  
*Do You Love Me?*

Sunday, April 27, 2008

We all know the story of the elderly couple who are sitting at the breakfast table. The husband is hiding behind the newspaper (probably reading sports statistics) while the wife keeps badgering him.... “Do you love me?” she asks. “You never say anything anymore, you never talk to me. Do you love me?” This keeps going on until finally in exasperation he lowers his newspaper and says to her in a very measured way, “Mabel, I told you I loved you on our wedding day, and if anything changes, you’ll be the first to know!”

Several years ago, a book came out in Christian bookstores entitled The Five Love Languages. In it, author Gary Chapman, describes different ways that people express love or experience being loved by someone else. The transaction of loving or being loved is not as easy as exchanging a brief word at the breakfast table! And Chapman has identified five distinct ways that this takes place.

The first is the simplest it seems, but for some the most difficult to practice....a word of affirmation or of love.... “I love you...You are so precious to me....” The second is the spending of quality time with someone.... giving undivided attention, listening, taking a walk or doing tasks together—washing the dishes, weeding the garden. Expressing somehow that no one else, nothing else is more important in this moment than the beloved. Third, there are those who express or experience love through acts of service.... “Let me take out the garbage for you today” or “what errand can I run for you?” or “how can I lighten your load?” Fourth, some find it easiest or most fulfilling to express love by giving gifts.... a bouquet of flowers, a piece of jewelry, a book...something that becomes a token, a symbol of love. Finally, for some, physical touch or some gesture...a caress, a kiss, a hug, is what makes them feel most cherished.

In today’s scripture reading from John, the risen Jesus approaches Peter after their breakfast on the shores of Lake Galilee. “Peter, do you love me more than these?” Jesus queries. These, is the other disciples, of course. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you...” is Peter’s first response. “Then feed my lambs.” A second time, Jesus asks, “Peter, do you love me?” “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” “Tend my sheep.” A third time Jesus asks, “Peter, do you love me?” “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” “Feed my sheep.”

It seems like a strange and vulnerable question for Jesus to ask, doesn’t it? “Do you love me?” What answer might he hear? What response might he receive? But I suppose after his crucial last days...his arrest and trial and crucifixion, his experience of being denied and abandoned by his best friends; the worst had already been done. What could he lose? Peter—you who said three times that you didn’t know me—do you love me?

In some ways, worship is a time when Christ confronts all of us his followers and presses us to answer this same question anew, “Do you love me?” “Peter, do you love me?” “Joe, do you love me?” “Jill, do you love me?” Second Church, do you love me?

That question will have to be answered by each and every one of us, in one way or another. And it is true that just as there are multiple languages of love, not all of our answers are going to look exactly the same. But let me suggest *that our responses will have to incorporate elements* each of the five love languages—*words, time, service, gifts, and gestures*.

When we worship, we declare out loud, in words and songs and prayers, that we love God. We declare in each other’s presence that we adore, and we praise God. In so doing, we are also offer God our time and attention. In my experience, in this day and age the most difficult thing for many to do is to give of their time. Time has become for us a commodity as rare and precious as gold. So many other things vie for our time, so much to do, so busy are we that we do not give it easily. So worship and prayer are ways in which we declare to God.... “You are worthy of my time. I will pay attention fully and wholeheartedly to you now.”

Garrison Keillor, in his inimitable story-telling style, writes about Larry, a resident of Lake Wobegon. Larry was saved 12 times at the Lutheran Church, an all-time record for a church that never gave altar calls! There wasn’t even an organ playing “Just As I Am Without One Plea” in the background. Regardless of that, between 1953 and 1961, Larry Sorenson came forward 12 times, weeping buckets and crumpled up at the communion rail, to the shock of the minister, who had delivered a dry sermon on stewardship. But now he needed to put his arm around this person, pray with him and be certain he had a way to get home. “Even we fundamentalists got tired of him,” writes Keillor. God didn’t mean for you to feel guilty all your life. There comes a time when you should dry your tears and join the building committee and grapple with the problems of the church furnace and the church roof. But Larry just kept repenting and repenting. (G K Leaving Home, p.182)

There is a rule of thumb that in any organization 20% of the people do 80% of the work. I’ve never tried to calculate it. But I do often wonder if there are people in the pew who think that ministry, serving Christ’s church, working for God’s kingdom, responding to a call, is for someone else, and not for them.

In his book, Reaching for the Invisible God, Phil Yancey describes life with God in terms of a journey with three movements—from childhood to adulthood, and then from adulthood to parenthood. Each stage of development has its important learnings, but it is also essential that we move forward. In the childhood of faith, we learn trust and grace; we learn that we are loved. Bu there comes a time when we have to get past being “infants in the faith.” Childhood is followed by the freedom, discovery and self-giving of adulthood. We love to love in return. But even that is not an end or goal—for the goal of the Christian life is to serve and to share, to offer life to others as parents share life with their children. There comes a time when we have to accept the charge to service and sharing, no longer content simply to seek nurture and love, but seeking to share life with others.

Shortly after the spiritual and economic devastation of WWII a movement was founded in Paris by a monk named L'Abbe Pierre, in which beggars who lived on the streets organized themselves into communities and began to support themselves by collecting and sorting garbage, rags, and bottles. Participants, once they got on their feet and off of the streets, were given the responsibility of caring for or helping another beggar poorer or more needy than him or herself. The whole idea caught fire, became very successful and soon this organization called Emmaus spread all over Europe.

But as Europe became more prosperous and this work became successful, L'Abbe Pierre feared that the movement would turn inward—becoming rich and powerful and that the whole impact of knowing Christ in these kinds of communities would be lost. So Emmaus moved on to Asia—opening a hospital in Vellore, India among lepers, and founding communities in Vietnam, Korea, Japan. “We must serve, or we die.” L'Abbe Pierre used to say.

Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Three times Peter declares his love for Christ, only to be entrusted three times with the ministry of Christ...to feed and tend the sheep. Peter was given a charge, an assignment, a ministry. Peter was commissioned then and there as the new shepherd. Faith's response is not just in words, but in action...and in all the ways that love for Christ demonstrates itself in human caring.

Do you love me? Jesus asks. Yes, Lord, we say and we sing.  
Do you love me? Yes Lord, Here and now, I give you my time and my attention.  
Do you love me? Yes Lord, I bring you gifts of value and beauty.  
Do you love me? Let me kneel, raise my hands, touch someone else's life.  
Do you love me? Yes, Lord, I will feed your sheep in acts of service and sharing.