

“DO YOU LOVE ME?”

Jesus

In the last chapter of the gospel of John¹, Jesus asked Peter this question not only once, but three times. And as I was reading this passage of Scripture, I was particularly moved by the intimate dialogue between them. But before I get to the heart of the matter, I want to lay out the scene leading up to this moment.

This episode takes place after Jesus' resurrection. In fact, this is the third time He appears to His disciples. The last time they had seen Him, He had told them to go to the mountain in Galilee, and to wait for Him there. However, impulsive and impatient Peter had had enough of waiting, and eventually decided to go fishing with other disciples of Jesus.

Now, we find Jesus standing by the Sea of Galilee watching them. He finally calls out to them: “Friends, have you caught anything yet?” After an unfruitful night of fishing, their answer is a resounding “NO!” So, Jesus says: “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you’ll find some.” They obey His command and, amazingly, they caught one hundred and fifty three fish that morning; so much so that their nets should have broken, but didn’t.

At first, they don’t recognize it’s Jesus, but then John says to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” In his excitement, Peter jumped into the water. The other disciples then come ashore, dragging the net full of fish. When they get out on land, they see a charcoal fire with fish and bread laid out on it. Jesus says to them: “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” Peter immediately obeys, and when the meal is ready, Jesus says, “Come, and let’s have breakfast!” He took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

What an incredible scene! We can see here that in spite of their disobedience, Jesus still loves them and cares for them. These men are hungry after a night out fishing, and in His deep love for His disciples, He prepares a meal for them and even serves them. Then, they all sit down and eat.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these [in other words, the boat, the nets and other fishing gear]?” Peter answered, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Jesus said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter replied, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Then Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” For the third time, Jesus said, “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.” Then Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

In this brief dialogue, Jesus clearly wants to get through to Peter. He repeats three times the question "Do you love me?", and after the third time, we see that Peter is grieved. Many times Jesus rebuked him for being impetuous and impatient. But when Peter denied Him three times at the outset of His trial, he clearly displayed another side of him: his human frailty and fear. Although Peter had been painfully aware of his disobedience and failure at the time, Jesus knew that if he was to play the crucial role He had chosen him for, Peter would need to be restored. And on that particular morning, Jesus goes to the heart of the matter. Peter needed to realize that although he had denied Christ, Christ had not forsaken him. He also needed to understand what kind of love Jesus was expecting from His disciple.

In the beginning of His ministry, Jesus told Peter and His other disciples that He would make them 'fishers of men'. Jesus is now challenging Peter to permanently abandon his former life and be exclusively devoted to following Him. And for this to happen, Peter is to be reminded that his love for the Lord must be in complete obedience, commitment and devotion to Him. In other words, to give up every aspect of his life to his Lord and Savior, which he eventually did until his death. In fact, Peter died as a martyr, requesting to be crucified upside down, as he felt unworthy to die in the same manner as Christ.

I think we can all identify with Peter in some way or another. He has all the shortcomings that we're so familiar with in our own lives. He thinks he's had it all figured out; that he's committed to the Lord more than he probably is; that his love and faith in Jesus can't be shaken, and that he can face any trial triumphantly. Eventually, though, he realizes that he failed miserably... And by the time this conversation takes place between them, he's really a broken man. Yet he realizes that Jesus still loves him.

Like Peter, from time to time, God also needs to correct or rebuke us to help us grow spiritually. It's never easy to acknowledge that personal changes need to be made in us and in our lives. However, when we're totally dedicated to God, we understand that the divine process of being 'refined' is part of His plan. It can be quite challenging at times, but in the end, we can always see the beauty of God's work in us.

You might have heard the story about a woman who goes to a silversmith to watch the process of refining silver. There are different versions of it, but the analogy is the same. This one recounts the story of a few ladies who get together to study the Scriptures. It goes on to say that one day, they came upon this remarkable statement which is written in Malachi 3:3: "He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." One lady proposed to visit a silversmith, and then report to the others what he said about the subject.

She went accordingly, and without telling him the purpose of her visit, she asked the silversmith to tell her about the process of refining silver. After he had fully described it to her, she asked: "Sir, do you watch while the work of refining is going on?" The silversmith replied: "Oh yes, ma'am. I must sit with my eyes steadily fixed on the furnace, for if the time necessary for refining is exceeding in the lightest degree, the silver would be damaged."

The lady saw at once the beauty and comfort in the Scripture she had read earlier, in that God does the same with us. Even though He deems necessary to refine us through momentary trials, He is constantly watching over us. Furthermore, in His love and wisdom, He will only allow what is best for us, and that which we can endure... Before leaving, the lady asked the silversmith one final question: "How do you know when the process is finished?" He answered: "Oh, that's quite simple... When I can see my own image in the silver."

This story is such a beautiful analogy of how God, under His loving care, slowly and patiently refines us so that our hearts and lives become more and more a reflection of His Son, Jesus. And as the writer of the following song expresses so well his heart's desire to be changed, I hope and pray we also make it our prayer...

Change my heart Oh God, make it ever true.
Change my heart Oh God, may I be like you.
You are the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me, this is what I pray.

As true believers and followers of Jesus, the Word of God constantly reminds us that we're to find our lives by losing them, to fulfill our lives by emptying them, and to live our lives by dying to self. Jesus Himself said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."² This is certainly not for the faint of heart, and the reason why Jesus also said to count the cost³, which means recognizing and agreeing to some terms first. In following Christ we can't simply follow our own inclinations. We can't follow Him and the world's way at the same time. So, what's going to motivate us? LOVE. The kind of love that can only be experienced, felt and expressed through the Spirit of God abiding in us. It is the only power that can produce this kind of devotion.

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this; that one lay down his life for the ones he loves."⁴ And that's exactly what He did for us, sinners. And what is God's first commandment? "You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." God calls us first and foremost to love Him. In fact, the second part of that great commandment is, "Love your neighbor as yourself", which fulfills all the other laws that God gave dealing with human relationships. And it is the kind of love God seeks in His followers.

I want to end here with some food for thought...

Let's imagine ourselves sitting on the shore, and having breakfast with Jesus. How would we feel? Ecstatic, I'm sure! But how would we react and answer if, at some point, Jesus asked us these three questions: Do you love me more than anything and anyone in your life? Do you love me with all your heart, obeying and standing firm on my Word? Would you still love me and remain faithful to me even if you were persecuted because of me?

Oh, Heavenly Father, search our hearts, show us where we need to change, and help us to be obedient to your will so we may become the persons you want us to be... more and more like your Son, Jesus. In His name I pray. Amen.

With love,
Beth

¹John 21:1-18 ²Luke 9:23 ³Luke 14:27-30 ⁴John 15:13