

Sermon, 22 April 2007—Third Sunday of Easter

Acts 9:1-19; Psalm 33; Revelation 5:6-14; John 21:1-19

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

After Jesus' Resurrection, in a kind of puzzled lull, several of his disciples decided to leave Jerusalem and return to Galilee to go fishing. It is a strange moment: they have seen the Risen Lord, and yet seem not yet fully convinced of their next steps. Peter, showing again his leadership, says he will go fishing, and a handful of the disciples decide to go with him.

Again we have a story of a miraculous catch of fish. They work all night and catch nothing. At dawn, a figure on the shore tells them to try one more time. When they do, they catch so many fish they are unable to lift the nets into the boat. They realize then, of course, that Jesus is on the shore, risen and welcoming. In fact, he has breakfast waiting for them.

The conversation we heard in today's lesson is the conversation Peter and Jesus have after breakfast—the first recorded time they are alone together after Jesus' resurrection. It is not surprising that the painful subject of Peter's denial of Jesus during Jesus' trial comes up, though it only comes up indirectly. Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, so three times Jesus asks Peter, "do you love me?" But there is a profound lesson hidden in the Greek, which is lost in translation.

The Greeks had more than one word for love. You may know this from C. S. Lewis' famous book, The Four Loves, in which he looks at the four Greek words for love. There is *Eros*, which is love as attraction and desire, a longing to attain and enjoy, which can reach obsessive scorching intensity, best depicted by salmon swimming upstream. Plato thought of this kind of love as a deity that capable of possessing human beings to the

point of madness, but in its benign form essential to us if we were ever to reach goodness, truth, and beauty. There is *Storge*, which is the familiar and familial sense of affection and comfort with each other, an easygoing fondness that families and neighbors feel. We are never driven mad by this fundamental and trustworthy goodwill. Then we have *Philia*, which is love as friendship, companions gathered around a common interest, a shared commitment, a mutual joy in some activity. Here there is a deliberate choice, regularly and intentionally reinforced, to share pleasure and excellence. Lewis is careful to say that what appears a commitment to the other person is actually a commitment to what can be done with the other person; true friends enjoy a common interest, rather than focusing their energy on each other. Finally, Lewis mentions *Agape*, which is the self-sacrificing love that provides for someone else, that extends itself to benefit another, that bestows gifts from a superior to an inferior, not as a response to the loveliness of the recipient—which could be utterly unapparent—but out of comprehension of what is needed. It is, of course, the word that the early Christians quickly picked up and transformed as a description of God’s love for us in Christ.

In this passage at the conclusion of John’s Gospel, two of those words are used, though in English we only hear the one word “love” repeated. *Agapao* is the verb for self-giving bountiful love; *phileo* is the verb for the love between friends. John is a subtle writer, and his play between these two verbs for loving cannot be without meaning. Jesus asks Peter the first time, “*agapas me?*”—you can hear it: Jesus asks, “do you love me in a self-giving way, and do you love me more than these?” Clearly, when Peter loved before, it was not at a level that risked his self, regardless of his extravagant and self-aggrandizing claims at the Last Supper table. He did not love Jesus

as Jesus loved him; he did not give himself, but protected himself, denied Jesus, fled weeping into the dark. He certainly did not love Jesus more than his companions did. Peter, no doubt now ashamed, trying now to be scrupulously honest and to say only what he believes he can commit to, tells Jesus that Jesus already knows the answer. He says, “*Philo se*”—you can hear it; Peter says, “I love you like a friend.” Jesus probably smiled and nodded, but he points out that Peter is not off the hook: “If you are my friend, Peter, then we would have joy in the same activity, and we would meet around a common interest; so feed my lambs.”

Jesus is not done. He asks Peter again, “*agapas me?*” Peter answers “*philo se*” again. Jesus smiles and nods again. Friendship is sufficient for Peter to care for Jesus’ own once Jesus is gone. So Jesus says, “Tend my flock.” Peter must remember that his actions impact others; he does not act in a vacuum. He must learn that friendship means responsibility for others. Betrayal is not simply a personal matter between the two of them. It wounds the community as well, and Peter must remain faithful for their sake, and tend his friend’s sheep.

The point of the story, though, even its sting, lies in the third question. In order to restore each denial, to repair each wounding, Jesus asks Peter again about his love. We hear that Peter grieved because Jesus questions him a third time. We might think, listening in English, that Peter is hurt because of the threefold repetition, which not only reminds him of the three denials, but begins to suggest that Jesus doesn’t believe Peter. But the true wound is in the Greek, because with the third question, Jesus turns Peter’s own seemingly safe term on him and smokes him out. Jesus asks Peter, using Peter’s own preferred and safer word for love, “*phileis me?*” You can hear it; Jesus asks Peter, on Peter’s *own* terms, on the terms of love between

friends, whether or not he does in fact love him. “Really? Are you even my friend?” Peter breaks down. Jesus knows everything, he says—Jesus knows Peter’s love and whether betrayal or faithfulness is Peter’s future. But Peter struggles to be honest. He doesn’t dare step up to *Agape*; he knows he must not make the inflated claim. But he is willing to be tested on his assertion of friendship. So he says again “*philo se.*” Jesus smiles and nods: friendship will do. “Feed my sheep. Share my project. Take care of my own then.”

My point is that many of us have exactly this conversation with God. We back off from the extravagant claims: we are not saints, we do not love as St. Paul or St. Francis or St. Therese. We know that; so we do not step above ourselves. In subtle ways, then, we say to Jesus, “I’m no spiritual hero, but I like what you say; I admire you; I’m willing to think that you and I are in the same ballpark, sharing an interest in the betterment of humanity: being thoughtful, doing good, helping out....” God’s question to us, over and over, is “am I not worth everything to you? Am I not worth the gift of your self?” We dare not take the step of *agape* love for God, but are at least honest enough not to claim to have taken it.

But I say to you, beware the day when you sense that God asks you, “OK, fine; let’s forget the extravagant love of saints. I know you are not prone to the self-giving love of *agape*. But do you really think we are friends? Do you think we are about the same thing? Do you care for what is mine? Do you and I invest in the same projects? Do you show up where I have already shown up? Do you find delight in what delights me? Do you even enjoy hanging out with me?” Beware the day God asks you those questions. God willing on that day, when our easy claims, when our good-natured unexamined sense that we and God can’t really be opposed, when our pal-around comfort is called into question—God willing on that day, we

will be able to answer as Peter answered, in tears: “You know everything; you know whether or not I love you; you know whether or not you and I really meet around the same interests, with the same goals, caring about and enjoying the same things.” God willing we will see that we do love God as a friend. God willing on that day, we will hear God say—because this will be a sign that the friendship holds—“Then look after what is mine; take care of my own; love the people I love; sustain the Creation in your way as I sustain it in mine; let’s you and I together be about the same things: forgiveness and reconciliation and justice and peace, with room for all at the table.”

Then, of course, it will be apparent to us and to others that we follow the Risen Christ. But it won’t only be that. As Jesus said at the Last Supper, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” What it would be, to be called a friend of God, as Adam and Eve were, whom God visited in the cool of the day in Eden, as Abraham and Sarah were, who received God at supper, and as Moses was, to whom God spoke, as the Book of Exodus tells us, “face to face, as one speaks to a friend”!

So Jesus asks each one of us, “can you love me as a friend even, if giving your self to me completely is too much?” And perhaps, after all, that is the first step to take, if we are to go where he has gone before us, if we are to enter into the eternal life of the Holy Trinity, to share their delight in each other, and to rejoice there for all eternity in the praise of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, One God, whom we also praise this day.