

## **Do You Love Me?**

John 21:1-19; Jeremiah 32:36-41; Revelation 5:1-6, 11-12

April 22, 2007

Church of the New Covenant

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There is one primary theme that runs through the entire Bible, namely, God's love for us. In Jeremiah, where God is promising to restore the people of Israel to their home, God declares with utter delight, "They shall be my people, and I will be their God!" This is an echo of the passage in the preceding chapter (31), one which has special meaning for this congregation, where God declares that there will be a new covenant written not in stone but within the heart of the people, and, God says, "I will be their God and they shall be my people."

Since the beginning of all things God has intended one thing, willed one thing, sought one thing: that we would live in the life-giving love of God.

It reaches its fullest expression in Jesus' life and death. "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son." (Jn 3:16) Jesus came here to teach us about God's love, to live as an example of God's love, and to suffer the depths of our pain and sorrow and rise again to declare the full power of that love.

God is continually trying to tell us one thing: God loves us, and God wants us to live in the fullness of that love.

In the last chapter of the Gospel of John, we encounter this same theme from a different angle. The resurrected Jesus has breakfast with several of the disciples and directs this question, three times, to Peter: "Do you love me?"

Each time Peter responds with the phrase, "You know that I love you," which is a bit puzzling. A phrase like that is sometimes a mild reproach, almost like saying "What a silly question," because the answer should be obvious. It reminds the one asking of what he already knows.

It can also mean, "Uh-oh. If you don't already know that, there is a problem," because the answer is by no means apparent. Perhaps Peter is not trying to remind Jesus of something Jesus already knows, but wondering in his own heart if his love really is questionable.

What Jesus is doing is reminding Peter of something that should be foremost in Peter's mind. It shouldn't be a mere assumption, "Of course I love you." It should instead be vital; it should be the driving energy of Peter's every thought and action.

When we hear the theme again in this gospel passage, we hear also God continually trying to find out one thing from us: "Do you love *me*?"

This question is not merely seeking information. How we answer this question goes much farther than reassuring someone that they are well-thought-of. How we answer this question will require from us more than warm feelings; it will require concrete action. This is why each time Peter says, "I *do* love you", Jesus attaches to that love the command to act upon it. "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."

In most respects, Christians are pretty good at coming up with ways we can act that give some indication that we love God.

We engage in ministries of compassion, working with persons who need food, shelter and clothing. We participate in ministries of prophecy, calling upon those more powerful than ourselves to correct injustices and build a society in which all persons are respected. We passionately pursue the worship of God in this place, seeking solace and guidance, and inviting others to share in the bounty we receive here.

We are brought up short, however, when confronted with events like the shootings at Virginia Tech. When I first heard what happened, I was, of course, stunned: I couldn't believe it; I gasped inwardly as I tried to imagine a man barging into my classroom with death in his eyes shooting me and everyone around me with systematic brutality.

I began to read the profiles of the victims.

- A professor of engineering – a Holocaust survivor, 76 years old – who barricaded the classroom door with his body long enough for some students to jump out the window
- A 22-year-old senior who was a top student, a leader on campus, and who attempted to come to the aid of the first victim
- An 18-year-old freshman with a love for horses and a blinding smile
- A French instructor from Canada, who leaves behind a husband and two daughters

- 33 people died unnecessarily

I thought about the suffering of their families, their friends, of the sorrow and shock on the Virginia Tech campus and the waves of grief that have traveled through other college campuses and communities around the nation and around the world.

These waves began rising up inside of me, and then I was furious with the little twerp for being such an idiot that he thought he had the right to kill a bunch of perfectly nice people because of his freakish little distresses.

Anger. Grief. Shock.

What is the meaning of the question “Do you love me?” in the face of that?

As we wonder about this, we need to remember, without diminishing the anguish of all those affected by what happened there, that it happened within a larger context. Two days later a car bomb went off in Baghdad. It killed 190 people.

People are killed by bombs there every day, as well as in the military attacks by Shiites, Sunnis and Americans.

“Do you love me?”

Systematic slaughters continue in Sudan.

“Do you love me?”

Killings continue at the hands of both Palestinians and Israelis.

“Do you love me?”

Hundreds of people have been killed just this week in Somalia and Ethiopia.

“Do you love me?”

Back here in the United States, in a reversal of a once-encouraging trend, killings with handguns are escalating at an alarming rate.

“Do you love me?”

We have to remember who is asking the question. In a magnificent and unsettling vision in the book of Revelation, we are taken up into the great hall of heaven. There are blinding flashes of lightning, the constant pounding of thunder and the majestic refrains of the heavenly chorus. God is seated upon a throne, surrounded by angels and elders and very bizarre creatures. God's right hand holds a scroll with seven seals, containing portents for the future of humankind.

“Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ ... Then I saw a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. ... ‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered.’ The only one in the entire universe who is worthy to open the seals, each one of which releases unimaginable torrents of human suffering, is the One who himself has suffered it all.

The Lamb, of course, is Christ, still bearing in his resurrected body the wounds that killed him on the cross;

bearing in his own body the wounds of all thirty-three persons killed at Virginia Tech, including the miserable Seung-hui Cho;

bearing in his own body the wounds of those killed in the Baghdad car bombings;

bearing in his own body the wounds of all people killed by the violent acts of their fellow human beings;

The Lamb who was slaughtered, but who stands by the throne fully alive.

“Do you love me?”

None of us has an adequate answer to this question. All of us are pretty much like Peter, wondering if we really do love the One Who Loves Us.

None of us has an adequate answer to any of the painful questions that arise every time a human being suffers, especially when it is at the hands of another human being. All of us have been wounded; all of us has lost something in the events of this past week.

In Christ, God sees, hears, and feels all of this anguish.

None of us has any answers, but we do have Christ, who, as he came back to feed his befuddled disciples on a beach in Galilee, shows up among us every day. When he asks the painful question, “Do you love me?” he seeks not to dispute our loyalty or intent. He seeks instead to remind us of the limitless depth of the love he bears for us.

His question is a challenge, to be sure, but it is much more than that. It is an invitation. After asking Peter again and again, “Do you love me?” Jesus gives him his final instructions: “Follow me.”

Follow me into the love I continue to offer you.

Follow me into the suffering I bear for all people.

Follow me as I bring all this suffering before the throne of God, where I stand not just as a victim of it, but as victor over it.

If we follow Christ, we are empowered by him to take upon ourselves a measure of the pain of someone else who suffers, and participate not only in the suffering but in the labor to redeem it. If we follow Christ by striving for peace in a world that too easily chooses violence, if we follow Christ in the simple act of praying for those grieving in the aftermath of the killings wherever they occur, then we are participating in Jesus’ loving labor of redemption.

“Do you love me?” “Yes, Lord. I do love you. Please help me live as fully as possible in your love.”