

DO YOU LOVE ME?

John 21:12-19

[A scene from *Fidler on the Roof* © 1971 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc]

Tevye: “Golde, I have decided to give Perchik permission to become engaged to our daughter, Hodel.”

Golde: “What??? He’s poor! He has nothing, absolutely nothing!”

Tevye: “He’s a good man, Golde. I like him. And what's more important, Hodel likes him. Hodel loves him. So what can we do? It’s a new world... a new world. Love. Golde... Do you love me?”

Golde: “Do I what?”

Tevye: “Do you love me?”

Golde: “Do I love you? With our daughters getting married, and this trouble in the town, you're upset, you're worn out, go inside, go lie down! Maybe it's indigestion.

Tevye: “Golde I’m asking you a question... Do you love me?”

Golde: “You’re a fool”

Tevye: “I know... But do you love me?”

Golde: “Do I love you? For twenty-five years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow, after twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?”

Tevye: “Golde, the first time I met you, was on our wedding day, I was scared.”

Golde: “I was shy.”

Tevye: “I was nervous.”

Golde: “So was I.”

Tevye: “But my father and my mother, said we’d learn to love each other, and now I’m asking, Golde, do you love me?”

Golde: “I’m your wife.”

Tevye: “I know... but do you love me?”

Golde: “Do I love him? For twenty-five years I’ve lived with him, fought him, starved with him, twenty-five years my bed is his, if that’s not love, what is?”

Tevye: “Then you love me?”

Golde: “I suppose I do.”

Tevye: “And I suppose I love you too.”

Both: “It doesn't change a thing, but even so, after twenty-five years, it’s nice to know.”

Do you love me? It is early in the morning when Jesus meets with his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. When faced with moving on with life without Jesus, these seasoned fishermen seem to completely forget about their years of ministry with Jesus and return to what is comfortable and familiar. Simon Peter exclaims, "I am going fishing!" Immediately six others respond, "We are going with you!" So off they go for a night time of fishing and similar to the time Jesus first called the disciples in Luke 5:1-11, they come home empty handed.

At first, the disciples do not recognize it is Jesus calling to them from the shore asking if they have caught anything, but just as before, Jesus instructs them to cast their nets one more time. I imagine this struck a deep chord among the disciples and, the Beloved Disciple, John, recognizes it is Jesus, announcing it to the others. Peter dives in and swims to shore with the others following with the catch. Jesus has a fire all ready for grilling the fish and they share a meal.

What follows is one of my favorite conversations between Jesus and Peter. N.T. Wright believes that Jesus took Peter away from the others, so they are not privy to this conversation. It becomes a moment of forgiveness, healing and a building up of confidence for Peter. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord, you know I love you!" Three times, Jesus asks, each time giving Peter instructions and three times Peter responds in the affirmative. The three questions correspond to Peter's three denials. Three for complete forgiveness, yes, but three also for a reminder. The smell of the charcoal fire lingers. Peter's night of agony – and Jesus' own night of agony, returns.

Each time Jesus asks the question, "Do you love me?" Peter says, Yes; and each time it is as though Jesus responds, "All right then..." giving him a fresh challenge; a new commission: time to learn how to be a shepherd; time to feed lambs and sheep, to look after them. Not only is this a fresh commission; not only is Jesus trusting Peter to get back into fruitful work, and to turn his undoubted though shaky love for Jesus to good account – it is more. Jesus is sharing his own work, his own ministry, with Peter. (N.T. Wright, John part 2, page 164.)

I often marvel in Jesus' faith in the first disciples; that in spite of everything...Peter's denial, Judas' betrayal, sleeping disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, and ultimately the hope from the disciples that Jesus would stage a military coup. In spite of all this...Jesus still commissions them to carry on His work. And herein lays the secret of all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay and ordained, full-time or part-time...if you and I are going to do any single solitary thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is the rock-solid foundation. Somewhere, deep down inside, there is a love for Jesus and though we have let him down more than once, Jesus wants to find that love, to give you a chance to express it; to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give you new work to do. (Wright, page 165). And at the risk of being redundant, by our very baptism we are all called to ministry. Exactly what this looks like is enormously varied. But in each situation, like the first disciples, we are called to move in and act with all of our doubts, and fears within and without.

I love the following words of the late Henri Nouwen: As Jesus ministers, so he wants us to minister. He wants Peter to feed his sheep and care for them, not as “professionals” who know their clients’ problems and take care of them, but as vulnerable brothers and sisters who know and are known, who care and are cared for, who forgive and are being forgiven, who love and are being loved.

Somehow, we have come to believe that good leadership requires a safe distance from those we are called to lead. Medicine, psychiatry and social work all offer us models in which “service” takes place in a one-way direction. Someone serves, someone else is being served, and be sure not to mix up the roles!

But how can anyone lay down his life for those with whom he is not even allowed to enter into a deep personal relationship? Laying down your life means making your own faith and doubt, hope and despair, joy and sadness, courage and fear available to others as ways of getting in touch with the Lord of life. Laying down your life means being transparent before others.

How can we best apply this final chapter in the Gospel of John to our daily living? There is, of course the obvious call to ministry mentioned above, but is there an even deeper meaning for these words on our faith journeys? Howard Snyder, a professor of mission history and theology at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, warns us that Christian community is not mere cordiality, courtesy or sociability. It’s not a least-common-denominator fellowship along the lines of a neighborhood potluck.

Instead, true Christian community makes demands on its members, and expects a high level of commitment. Regular worship attendance is essential, as is hard-edged discussion of theology and Scripture. Churches should not pander to the feel-good demands of low-commitment members, writes Snyder in *Christianity Today* (October 2003). That’s a fatal mistake.

It’s much better to have high expectations, and to maintain a discipleship direction. Churches that find a way to do this are faster-growing, longer-lasting and more vital than congregations with a relaxed view of community life. Feeding Christ’s sheep also means looking outward, beyond the walls of our Christian community. And, in this, I feel Marquis does well. Feeding the vulnerable lambs that Jesus has entrusted to our care means putting time, energy and money into the concerns of the community around us. Whether the issues are family disintegration, illiteracy, alcoholism, domestic violence or gang activity, it is important for us to be an outward-looking congregation that engages the world with a servant mentality.

We may find that, in an unexpected way, this outward focus has an internal advantage: It results in a more vital congregation. Jesus wasn’t kidding when he said that those who lose their lives for his sake will actually save their lives, as they discover the new life that comes through service and sacrifice (Mark 8:35). A concern for the community not only benefits society but makes the church itself more appealing. People are attracted to congregations that put faith into action and set out to make a difference in the world. (Homiletics online, April 25, 2004)

Yet, stepping out of the safe comfort zones that have been established in the church is very disconcerting. Baptist Preacher and Sociologist Tony Campolo strikes a chord regarding the ability to stay vibrant in ministry. We all start off flying like eagles when it comes to doing the work of the kingdom. But there is a point at which we slow down a bit, but we are still running like deer, but all of us come to that point where we are just about making it. We are walking along and hoping that we don't faint. But the Scripture is clear when it says that if we wait upon the Lord we shall be renewed.

How many of us spend time each day waiting on the Lord? How many of us take time during the day to go to a quiet place and center down in Jesus, asking him for nothing, but simply surrendering to his presence? How many of us, in quietude and in stillness, surrendered to an invasion of the Spirit, which can renew and revitalize us to others and to the kingdom? It should be noted that the next verse after Isaiah 40:41 tells us that in quietude and in stillness, he will come into us. Even in our praying there are too many words. No wonder the Scripture says, "Be still."

On this first Sunday of May I invite each of you to consider the words of Jesus to Peter and the words of Tony Campolo. Jesus' command to Peter still hold true for God's church everywhere. Feed, Tend, Feed. But I understand fully the enormity of taking on such a task. It can be terrifying, so we must also sit daily in the presence of the Lord to wait upon God's leading. We are coming up on our first anniversary as partners in ministry. As in every place I have served the potential for making a huge difference in the world is just within our grasp. Be encouraged, however, that as long as we listen to the leading of the Holy Spirit, God will raise up both the funds and the workers for the kingdom. We just need to listen and be willing to move with God. These words are worth pondering!!