

3rd Sunday Easter

John 21:1-9

Do You Love Me, Peter?

The places and disciples mentioned at the start of John's final chapter remind the reader of previous events of this gospel. The Sea of Tiberias alerts us to the story of the Feeding. Cana to the transformation of water into wine. The presence of Simon Peter and Thomas recalls their confessions of commitment and faith. So, we are not surprised to read of the abundance of fish caught by the disciples or of the three-fold declaration by Peter of his love for Jesus.

Jesus gave Peter his commission only after he had declared his love for him. He had to do this to atone for his denials, and to give an example for those who would follow him in exercising responsibility for the Church of Christ. Peter's task is given him in the language of sheep and lambs. He was to be the shepherd of the flock of Jesus.

The best commentary on this expression is to be sought in Jesus' own description of himself as the Good Shepherd. Peter, like Jesus, was to know his sheep and be a means of their salvation. As Jesus knew the Father, he was to know Jesus. He was to be a principle of unity for the divided. He was to know them by name. He was to be ready to lay down his life for them.

The irony is that in the last part of today's gospel is that Peter wasn't ready. When Jesus asked him, "Do you *love* me more than these?" Jesus uses the Greek word for love, "agape," which really means *a divine love*, a love where one is willing to lay down their life for the other. And Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I *love* you." But Peter uses the Greek word for love, "philia," which really means a brotherly love, but not a love where one is willing to lay down his life for the other.

Jesus asks Peter a second time again using the word agape. Peter responds the same. However, the third time Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, but Jesus used the Greek word for love, "philia," brotherly love. And Peter sighs, but answers the same, 'philia.' "OK," Jesus seems to say, "I'll meet you where you are at."

How would we answer Jesus' question if he were to ask us, "Do you love me?" Miracles won't change our hearts. Peter saw for himself that they caught 153 fish when this "man" on the shore told them to toss their nets on the other side of the boat. Miracles may change our doubt, but the only way to change our hearts is to love. The more we love the greater our hearts will grow in love, especially those we do not like.

We may volunteer for all kinds of ministries and service programs, and that is good, but until we learn to love, such acts of charity will only help us to be more generous and even loosen our grip on our possessions, until one day we are no longer possessed by them. Love can change our hearts and our grips.

The *practice* of our faith shouldn't just make us good *practicing* Catholics, it should change us into other Christs, "*altar Christus*," so that we can eventually love others with the heart of Christ. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples out of love, not just because they were dirty.

When I went back to college after my service in the Navy at the University of Dayton and before I joined the Marianist, I was talked into joining a student service club that hosted dances once a month to mentally challenged adults, adults who still lived with their parents.

At first, I dragged my feet until my friend's sister eventually dragged me into joining. I have to admit, it changed my life. Over time, I realized that I truly loved with these wonderful people each month, but also became aware that I did not have to live with them day in and day out. At one point I decided to make a commitment to at least once a week take one of the guys, called Mike, bowling. That friendship lasted ten years. It included UD Basketball games, front row seats, thanks to Bro. Ray Fitz.

I often wondered what changed my heart. Certainly not because of bowling and hosting dances. What helped was getting to know Mike for who he was, a person like me with all the potentials, maybe not as accessible as myself. He did have one advantage over me, and that was this wonderful acceptance and love for others. It was almost like he was born without this block that most of us have in especially trusting others and loving them without bound. Sounds very Christ-like to me.

I realized I didn't need a miracle like Peter to believe in Christ, but someone like Mike to teach me how to love like Jesus.