



What's love got to do with it? A reflection on John 21:15-17.

Jesus and Simon Peter are sitting apart from the other disciples, after finishing the breakfast of fish and bread Jesus had barbequed for them. Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Simon Peter responds, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." Jesus proceeds to ask this same question not once, but twice more, and gets the same response. What's up with this repetition anyway? No surprise that Peter feels hurt at the third question! Does Jesus doubt him? Is he not paying attention? What is going on here?

If we turn to original written text, we get some clues. Though they would have been speaking Aramaic, the gospels were written, years later, in Greek. Greek has many words for "love". We are most familiar with agape or self-giving love, philia or the affection between friends and eros or sexual desire. So, here's another look at the conversation:

Jesus: Peter, do you love me with all your heart? Peter: Yes, I have affection for you.
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This conversation is a glimpse into the human heart. Peter isn't the only one who resists full-hearted dedication to agape love of God and neighbour. Do we really have to give all of ourselves? Isn't just being nice enough? Do I have to love God with my whole heart? Can't I just be fond of God and pray a little when I think of it?

This short exchange is also a glimpse into the heart of Jesus. He is looking for a profession of agape love and receives philia. How disappointing, even heartbreaking, but can Christ work with that? Apparently, he can. He chooses to adjust his third question to match Peter's response, graciously meeting him where he is. And isn't that what God does for us throughout history? God is faithful, even when we turn away. God continues to trust us as co-creators, no matter how often we mess up. God is patient with us and seems to believe we are capable of growth and transformation.

Love itself, is an agent of growth and transformation. Like a seed, it can grow from a germ of potential into a life-giving vine. Jesus sees that germ of love in Peter's heart and is willing to work with imperfect materials. And so too, should we. "Feed my sheep, tend my sheep," is our call. Let us love as best we can today and be ready to be transformed.

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