

Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?

Per the website *liveboldandbloom* (*hey, we don't all read Barth...*): "Have you ever been in a relationship where you felt it was the other person's job to make you happy, to meet all of your needs, to understand you and know what you want without asking? Or have you been on the other side of this scenario? You were the partner expected to fulfill the other person and manage their happiness. Either situation is perpetually frustrating. One partner never feels happy and content in the relationship because they are looking to the other person to perform the impossible. And the other partner feels unappreciated and overwhelmed by the inexhaustible emotional demands and needs of the other. Lasting relationships require unconditional love."

Abiding by that observation, it would seem then that Jesus and Peter are in desperate need of a relationship counselor. Perfection personified in all other walks of life, Jesus magnificently fails at living-bold-and-blooming-101. For not only does he exhibit issues with poor self-esteem -- nagging Peter incessantly if he loves him or not -- but he also places difficult if not impossible demands upon said love, even suggesting that only by dying a similar death will Peter's discipleship be proven true. Jesus! Could you imagine being with someone like that?

It is not by accident or mere coincidence that Jesus asks him exactly three times if he loves him or not. You can almost see him pouring the Biblical salt right into Peter's wounds. *Remember Peter how I told you that you would deny me before the cock crows, and remember how you said that you wouldn't? Yeab, remember that? And remember how when I needed you most you were warming your grubby little hands by the fire with the centurions of the high court? And then remember how you proceeded to do exactly as I feared and you denied me not once, not twice, but thrice? Yeab. So now tell me you love me and how about you do so three times.*

And though I've potentially ever-so-slightly exaggerated the emotional landscape of their fallout, I think the scriptures are particularly clear in their teachings, namely that the love of Christ is often everything but unconditional. No matter how much we try in 2015 to preach and say otherwise, it's pretty hard to get around the fact that as Christ's disciples -- as those called to be in relationship with him -- we are required to do, say, and live a certain way. And we are reminded of that charge over and over again throughout the entire word of God.

Psalm 1

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Galatians 5:19-21

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Acts 4:32-35

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Matthew 7:21-23

'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

John 15:5-8

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Apparently only if you are willing to sell everything you have, not give in to fits of anger, and cease to practice sorcery. Please, someone tell me who can accomplish these things!? Now... do I really think God wants us to become vagabonds and Visigoths all for the sake of this relationship? No, I do not. Would I ever declare that Christ might one day say that he never knew us, or worse, that he would throw us away like a dead branch into a roaring fire? No, I probably wouldn't. But, I must admit there is a danger, or at least the risk of poverty in our spiritual integrity if we merely shrug our shoulders in the face of challenging passages such as this, line-vetoing them out of existence, replacing them with our own comfortable words and less-demanding explanations.

And yet it was argued just this past Wednesday at Bible Study that God's love through Christ is bigger than the text: limitless in its mercy and unquestioned in its grace. It was even affirmed that God's Word evolves over time, so that such things like we read here in our lesson from Acts, where we are asked to relinquish all of our possessions, should be updated to more adequately take into consideration our present economy and children's education, etc. Moreover, it was said by some nameless man that when Jesus persuades Peter to die a death similar to his own, that we shouldn't read ourselves into that because of the almighty Context. But, as the cliché of the dating-game goes, are we then really accepting Jesus for Jesus; at his word and who he claimed to be? Or are we merely exchanging him and indeed the Word of God for a marriage of convenience? Where God always forgives, we always screw up, and yet upon our death bed, there we assume Christ will be holding our hand saying, "ah, don't worry my love, you were a right jerk and a bloody liar but I loved you through and through nonetheless."

Would it really be so hard to believe that Jesus' love might be conditional? After all how many of our relationships are truly unconditional in their own terms? How many here are willing to be neglected year after year, or have your partner continually lie to your face, or come home a drunkard, or go out an adulterer, or never do the little things, or always forget the big things? Isn't there a limit to our failings before too much simply becomes too much and one leaves the other? Why then should we expect God, the progenitor of our very own image, to be ever forgiving and boundless in patience toward us, especially us, oh pitiful we who fail day after day?

The easy theological answer says that it's because God's grace abounds and abounds, and then abounds and abounds some more so that through such mercy we earn another chance. But if we're being rational or the very least fair, then we probably shouldn't expect that of God; nor believe that we're entitled to such grace because pragmatically, it doesn't suit many of us well. For too often we only take it for granted, living our lives according to our own schedules, our own pleasures, and we betray ourselves to believe that one day in the future when we've slowed down and the grays have settled in and the knees no longer bend, then and only then will we call upon Jesus, and, expect him to answer. Only then will we pop in the tape and look through the photo albums and say, *ah, I do miss him. I wonder what he's up to. I think I'll finally call him back...* But what if he has moved on?

Look at Peter. This guy outright denied Jesus three times and yet Christ was willing to once more reappear to him, once more forgive him, once more welcome him around a fire and a shared meal of fish and bread. But, their relationship would only continue if at that moment Peter agreed to Jesus' terms, defended that he loved him three separate times, and promised to tend to his sheep. If he accepted his conditions and from that moment forward began to work for the betterment of others, putting those in need before himself. Peter had to save his relationship then and there and he had to do so immediately before Jesus finally departed from him and left this world forever.

Friends, believe it or not, here then is the good news. Today we are loved by God. Today we have been forgiven by Christ. Today the Holy Spirit abides with us! And in a just a moment we will join at this table where Jesus has prepared a meal for us. For **us**! Can you believe it? Perhaps then we shouldn't take it for granted. Maybe then we shouldn't take it in vain. Probably then we should leave today changed and charged like Peter to do something more. To lend a helping hand to the unfortunate; to feed the hungry; to shelter the poor; to forgive a friend, even an enemy; to befriend an outcast, even a leper. To ultimately better the kingdom of God and all of its inhabitants, indeed all of our neighbors and to do so not only today, but tomorrow and the day after that and even the day after that ... and on all of those days we ought to want like a love-stricken boyfriend or girlfriend, husband or wife, to do something truly special for the incredible ministry of this man, our savior, whose relationship and love has already given us so much, even our very lives.

Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you really? Amen.