

# Praying His Questions, Hearing Our Hearts

*Bill King, Lutheran Campus Pastor at Virginia Tech*

## **Introduction**

One of my favorite cartoons shows Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden, with Adam telling his wife, “We’re living in a time of transition.” That should remind us that there has never been in a time when it was all nailed down. Transition and the questions which go with it are constant, following us from crib to coffin. But during the college years the questions become even more urgent. This is when our minds engage in serious demolition and construction. Truth once accepted without thinking seems inadequate, but we’ve yet to discover what will replace it. Everything seems up for grabs. Do I believe this stuff anymore? Can I trust God? What, if any, is God’s plan for my life? How do I decide what to do after college? What are my core values going to be? These are big questions that won’t go away.

This study is a series of exercises to help you wrestle with such questions within the context of Christian faith. It does not give you the answers, because the answers are as personal as you. God does not subscribe to Henry Ford’s famous dictum, “Any color you want, as long as it is black.” Each of us brings different history, concerns, and hopes to the questioning process. Answers worth having emerge as we engage in a conversation with God. Just as two people are moved by different elements in the same film, so your engagement with a Biblical text will lead you to different insights than mine.

## *Discernment*

I am inviting you to a process of discernment. “Discernment” is not just a fancy religious word for “making a choice.” Discernment is different from normal decision making in that it assumes God is a partner in the process. Most of the time when we make a decision, we line up the pros on one side of the ledger and the cons on the other. Whichever list is longer usually determines our choice. There is nothing wrong with that method and it can even be a part of discernment. Yet discernment is more than doing a cost/benefit analysis; it involves listening for the voice of God—and expecting to hear it in the silence of our hearts. When we enter into discernment our working assumption is that God is interested and present in the process. We come, our spirits filled with anticipation. We are like farmers in a drought plagued land, listening for the hope of distant thunder.

In inviting you into this process of discernment I make three assumptions: First, the most important questions are timeless and Scripture is interested in those questions. Second, God engages us through the Bible; it is a living document renewed by Holy Spirit who has the disconcerting habit of opening up interpretive paths we have never noticed before. Third, if we are willing to attend, God will not remain silent. Most of the time the issue is not that God refuses to speak, but that we are too noisy, preoccupied, or prejudiced to really listen. Sometimes the answer to our most perplexing problems is already present in our hearts; it just takes becoming still for God’s guidance to slowly rise it into our consciousness.

## *Format*

These exercises can be done as either a personal devotional exercise or in a group. If you use them in a group, make sure you allow plenty of time for individuals to hear and reflect on the text. Allowing several minutes of silence after reading the text, before group members share their thoughts, is not too much. Each exercise has three parts:

**Text** Every exercise is anchored in a question which Jesus poses to someone. This is the most important part of the exercise. Read the passage slowly. You might want to read the passage using several translations; this will allow you to hear different shades of meaning in the text. Listen to the question as though it were addressed to you personally, as though Jesus expects an answer from you. You may find it helpful to

imagine yourself as a character in the biblical story, engaged in conversation with Jesus. Another technique is to begin with the question and then write a dialogue, alternating between yourself and what Jesus might say. Experiment! Do whatever allows you to hear the question as an invitation to respond to Jesus.

- Context One danger of entering into a text in such a personal manner is that we can do violence to the core meaning of the passage. One of my teachers said that a text without a context is usually a pretext for the preacher to press a private agenda. We want to learn from the passage, not distort it. A text is not a blank canvas on which we can paint any meaning we choose. Considering the context helps us see how the passage fits into the larger gospel story and the relationship between the Biblical situation and our own.
- Reflection Each exercise includes a brief meditation which attempts to make the connection between the question Jesus poses and some of the questions we continue to face.

I hope what I write is helpful, but the goal of each exercise is your entering into prayerful conversation with Jesus around the question in the text. If the context and reflection pieces are not helpful to you, ignore them. "Deep calls to deep," says the Psalmist. That is the promise which undergirds these exercises. God speaks to our deepest longings out of unfathomable, holy love. As we listen to Jesus' questions and the answering witness of the Spirit in our hearts, the way becomes clearer.

# Who Do You Say That I Am?

## Text

Mark 8: 27-33

## Context

Within Mark's gospel this text is both a literary and theological pivot point. The public ministry in Galilee is drawing to a close; soon Jesus will turn toward Jerusalem and the death he knows awaits him. The stakes are getting higher for anyone who travels with Jesus, and this incident serves to focus the issue. As they come to Caesarea Philippi the disciples have been with Jesus for a while. They have observed him healing and teaching, seen him take on the religious leaders, feed thousands, and heal the hopelessly ill. They have heard various verdicts concerning their teacher, ranging from amazed awe to appalled anger. They have accumulated a lot of data. Now Jesus pushes them to render a judgment, to move from observation to commitment, from having an opinion about him to staking their future on his identity.

## Reflection

Anyone who has done much hiking in rugged terrain knows that a compass is an essential piece of equipment. The paths begin to look the same, the landmarks become hidden; without a compass you wander in circles. If we are considering life as a disciple, this is the "compass question": "Who do you say that I am"? Until we form some answer to this question it is hard to move very far along the path, because our response determines how much this Jesus will guide our choices. If we decide that Jesus is indeed the compass for our lives we will follow Him even when he seems to guide us over hard and dangerous ground. We will trust his guidance, even when it conflicts with our first perceptions.

On the average college campus, as in society at large, you can find a lot of opinions concerning this Jesus. You find some hostility, a lot of apathy, and a good deal of ignorance. Perhaps the most common attitude is that Jesus is a bit like meatloaf, one of many offerings in the cafeteria. The defining characteristic of a cafeteria is that you are free to pick and choose, to eat the things you like and leave the things you don't. So it is with most people's attitude toward Jesus. He may have some good ideas, may even have more wisdom than anyone else. But the majority feels free to disregard him when he leads in difficult directions. We, heirs of Jefferson and Madison, chafe at the hint of any constraint on our options or opinions.

Flannery O'Connor's character, the Misfit, sees more clearly than we do most of the time. Near the end of *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*, this cold-eyed killer tells his latest victim, "If he [Jesus] did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him..." Jesus has no interest in being one more author in the self-help section of Barnes and Noble. He has a more compelling agenda which begins with the compass question, "Who do you say that I am?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," in *3 By Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Signet Books, 1953), p.142.

## What Does it Profit a Person to Gain the Whole World and Forfeit Life?

### Text

Mark 8:34-37

### Context

When the disciples gather at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus pushes them to sift through all the opinions concerning the hot new rabbi and make their own judgment concerning His place in their lives, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter renders a ringing endorsement, “You are the Christ.” You might think Jesus would be satisfied with such a vote of confidence. Instead, he immediately begins to lay out the high cost of calling him “Lord.” Discipleship demands death and denial of self. Jesus has no interest in soft pedaling the demands of following him; he tells the disciples the way will be harsh. At the same time, however, he invites them to consider the danger of investing a lot and ending up with little. Buying junk is false frugality, particularly when the currency is life.

### Reflection

Near the end of the play *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More is on trial for his life. Richard Roth, a young man More befriended, betrays him at a critical moment. In exchange for a political appointment Richard perjures himself and ensures More’s conviction. Before he is led back to prison, More says, “I have one question which I’d like to ask the witness. That’s a chain of office you are wearing, Richard. May I see it? ....The red dragon, what is this?” Told that Sir Richard has been appointed Attorney-General of Wales, More continues, “For Wales? Why Richard it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world....But for Wales?”<sup>2</sup>

Most of us wear all sorts of insignia proclaiming our passions and loves. Buttons, pins, jerseys, club ties, and jewelry bear witness to the places and things for which we trade our lives daily. The question is whether any of those little symbols are in fact our own personal red dragon, mute testimony that we are selling our souls for the equivalent of Wales. We can not avoid sacrifice; we inevitably must choose one thing to the exclusion of another. The issue is whether we sacrifice our hearts and souls for that which is worthy—or for Wales. Life is a precious gift and few tragedies rival the realization that we have squandered it pursuing fool’s gold.

One of the great opportunities of the college years is to consider what is most important. Before the demands of job and family surge like a swift current, carrying us to places only dimly chosen, we can decide what is worth the one life we are given. We do better to ask searching questions and recalibrate our priorities as young adults than to discover in middle age that we have hoped for heaven and only bought Wales.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Bolt, *A Man For All Seasons* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 92.

## What Do You Want Me To Do For You?

### Text

Mark 10:46-52

### Context

The healing of blind Bartimaeus occurs at the end of a section in Mark's gospel concerning the nature and demands of discipleship. Earlier in this section Jesus has asked the ambitious James and John what they want him to do for them (10:36). Their request for the seats of power reveals that they do not understand what it means to follow Jesus. Though walking with Jesus daily, they are still blind to his mission. In contrast, when Jesus poses the same question to the blind beggar, he meets a man who fervently desires to see and who believes Jesus can grant him sight. The story functions on two levels. There is a physical healing, but Bartimaeus also symbolizes the desperate, hopeful longing for insight. Receiving his sight from Jesus he responds by following Jesus "on the way."

### Reflection

Mark Twain's short story, "The War Prayer" brutally illustrates the importance of subjecting our desires to thoughtful scrutiny. The story concerns a worship service held as the troops march off to war. The preacher offers a prayer in which he petitions that God grant safety to the soldiers and victory to their cause. Suddenly a stranger appears, claiming to be a messenger from God. God, he says, has heard the prayer. The Almighty will grant the prayer if this is what the congregation desires after he, the messenger, articulates the unspoken words which necessarily accompanied the preacher's pieties. In praying for the victory of their own cause they also have petitioned, "O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells;... help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief;... help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst..."<sup>3</sup>

The simple fact is that we do not have enough wisdom to see the full implications of our desires and actions. That which we most passionately desire may not be what is best for us or the world touched by our actions, radiating like ripples from rocks cast into a pond. Because we can not see all the consequences of our choices, it is all the more important that we not make those choices unthinkingly. Our most immediate need is not necessarily our deepest.

When Jesus asks Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" we may initially think the question absurd or even cruel. "He's blind, Jesus; what do you think he wants?" Yet the answer is not obvious. In asking the question Jesus invites Bartimaeus to a deeper level of reflection on what he wants, what he really wants, what he wants above all else in the world from God.

Much of our pain and dissatisfaction in life derives from not listening to the deepest longings of our hearts. God is eager to respond to our need, to grant us serenity in the midst of crisis, healing from tragedy and a new vision when the way seems closed. But we can not receive until we look deeply within ourselves, laying bare our wounds and confusion in response to Jesus' inquiry, "What do you want me to do for you?"

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain, *The War Prayer*, (New York: Harper Colophon, 1970).

## Do You Also Wish To Go Away?

### Text

John 6:66-69

### Context

Up until this point in John's gospel Jesus has enjoyed great success in attracting followers. In Jerusalem, Samaria, and Galilee the crowds came, drawn by Jesus' signs and wisdom. But following the feeding miracle in chapter 6 the glow begins to fade as Jesus' assertions become bolder, and following him more than a lark. "I am the bread of life" (35). "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (51). "I say to you unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you" (53).

Now the crowds begin to thin. Some are offended by the religious implications of Jesus' claims. Others can see that such words, true or not, can only end in violent confrontation. Most of the crowd realizes Jesus wants more from them than they are prepared to give. So they begin to drift away. The disciples in Jesus' inner circle come to a critical point; they also must decide whether to continue on the challenging journey he has set for them or take a new path.

### Reflection

I may be the only person to have graduated from Travelers Rest High School as a second clarinet. Most seniors made first part by simple longevity. Music was not a high priority. Other things energized and excited me more. Though I started lessons in elementary school, by high school I was not willing to put in the long practice hours for something I no longer deemed important. So I slowly turned my back on the clarinet.

College years are filled with decisions like mine regarding the clarinet. You discover new loves and turn your back on things which no longer excite. The glory and the terror of this time is the freedom. Nobody tells you when to go to bed, how to spend your time, who to hang out with, or what to believe. Yet the truth is that there was something rather comforting about having someone take responsibility for you. You like having the freedom to make mistakes, but you tend to make a lot of them in the beginning. It's not easy to turn your back on the past.

Few of those college decisions are more important than deciding whether you will embrace, reject, or modify the religious values carried over from childhood. The process is a bit like going into your closet to see if last year's winter coat still fits. Does it cover the essential parts? Does it bind in uncomfortable ways? Is it so hopelessly out of style as to be embarrassing? The college experience confronts you with new intellectual and emotional seasons. You have to decide if your religious wardrobe is adequate for the searing heat of fresh ideas and the cold of loneliness in new places.

Some try to avoid asking the hard questions. They either reject everything they have inherited in petulant, adolescent rebellion or desperately try to hold on to convictions they never really owned in the first place. Neither approach moves you to spiritual maturity. Jesus prefers that His disciples face their doubts sooner rather than later. He wants them to follow Him with eyes wide open to both the serious demands and amazing joys of his company. If you are tempted to go away, consider whether it is Jesus you are rejecting or an outmoded idea of Him. Jesus has no fear of our questions. He is confident that if we ask our questions with searching honesty and a willingness to grow, we will make the same confession as Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

## Do You Want To Be Healed?

### Text

John 5:1-18

### Context

Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to observe one of the religious feasts of Israel. He passes by a pool where invalids of all types are gathered due to a legend concerning the pool's magical healing powers. Jesus does not address the truth of the superstition nor concern himself with why one particular man is paralyzed. He simply asks him, "Do you want to be healed?" Just as John uses a healing miracle in chapter 9 to explore both physical and spiritual blindness, so here also the story functions on two levels. There is a physical healing, but it serves as the context to explore what it means to be healthy in the fullest sense. Health, says Jesus, is found in being open to the amazing power of God whenever it intersects our lives. We must not be bound by old assumptions and despair, because God can transform and heal us in unexpected ways.

It is not a foregone conclusion that everyone desires health. The lame man in the story is initially blind to the possibilities before him, and, as in the synoptic gospels, the religious leaders are more outraged by healing on the Sabbath than amazed by the outpouring of God's goodness. Sometimes we prefer an imperfect present to a future which demands change.

### Reflection

Like many middle-aged men I find myself increasingly fighting the battle of the bulge. Ask me if I want to be trim and healthy; I'll tell you I most certainly do. Ask me if I am willing to cut down on the foods I love, arise early enough to walk everyday, and commit to a weight training program, and I'll probably change the subject. I want to be buff, but not enough to make the necessary changes.

Jesuit spiritual director Anthony De Mello notes, "The best psychologists will tell you that...people don't really want to be cured. What they want is relief, and a cure is painful."<sup>4</sup> We do not like to suffer, but that does not necessarily mean we want to make major changes. Change is hard work. Change means letting go of the familiar. Usually all we want is sedation. Instead of deep healing, we settle for something to deaden the pain--sex, drugs, alcohol, or more socially acceptable escapes like sports or writing computer code until the wee hours.

We get a perverse payoff from our familiar wounds. Wounded people get a lot of sympathy. Nobody expects a lot from an invalid. Even when they are rude and demanding, those who have been through a lot receive an extra measure of patience from friends. There is a luscious savor to playing the innocent martyr, a moral leverage which comes from being the victim. That is why Jesus' question is not superficial small talk, but a penetrating invitation to introspection. Do you want to be healed? Do you want to grow? Do you want to risk change?

Few choose to be wounded, and no one should minimize the very real pain with which many struggle. In any classroom you find students whose lives are shadowed by sexual assault, incest, alcoholism, divorce, chronic illness, depression, and a variety of other burdens. The bruised need gentleness and patience. Yet Jesus suggests that at the right moment there is the possibility of moving on, of not being bound by the past. We can not change our history. We may not be able to change our external circumstances. But we can let go of the anger, fear, bitterness, self-pity, and anxiety which are often more debilitating than the original blow—if we decide we truly want to be healed.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony de Mello, *Awareness: A De Mello Spirituality Conference in His Own Words*, (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. XX.

# Are You Still Sleeping?

## Text

Matthew 26:36-45

## Context

When we read the narrative of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane there can be no doubt Jesus is truly human. He confronts all the issues with which the ordinary believer struggles: fear, uncertainty, fatigue, and isolation. While the Jesus of John's gospel can seem above the fray, Matthew's Jesus is most assuredly human. This time of prayer in the garden with his inner circle is Jesus' last time with them before his arrest and trial; here is one final opportunity for them to grasp the unexpected way he is the messiah. But instead of understanding his call and preparing themselves for the challenges ahead, they sleep as he struggles. The narrative offers a contrast between Jesus, who is expending every ounce of his energy to know and do the will of God, and his disciples who are both literally and figuratively asleep. In his question to the disciples we hear both disappointment and a challenge to wake up and prepare for the battle awaiting them as his followers.

## Reflection

Some years ago I saw a television program which featured a pleasure machine. In this show's science fiction world of the future, people go on vacation by hooking their brains up to a machine which makes their greatest longings seem intensely real. But in the show's story something goes wrong and the machine sears one man's fantasy into his brain. His mind becomes an endless loop, forever playing the same illusion over and over again.

The great religious teachers have often observed that, even without a machine, most people live their lives only vaguely aware of the world around them. We too live within a land of shadows hampered by illusion, seldom asking the deep questions of meaning. Gautama Buddha defines the goal of the spiritual quest as to become "awake." The apostle Paul urges his readers not to fall asleep but to keep awake and be sober (I Thessalonians 5:6). Jesus' question in the garden is more than a disappointed observation of their physical state; he implores them to shake off illusion and see what is most important before it is too late.

We easily sleepwalk through college, living on the basis of unquestioned assumptions. Classroom success demands putting on blinders; the next paper, project, and test unconsciously become the boundaries of life. Seldom do we ask why we pursue an education; we assume writing our own chapter in the American success story is life's goal: get a good job, live comfortably, avoid pain whenever possible. When we aren't focused on academics there are sedations aplenty. Parties distract us. Music fills our solitude. Football and fashion occupy our thoughts.

"Are you still sleeping?" It is hard, sometimes uncomfortable, work to shake ourselves awake and ask what a life is for. Yet that is what taking the call to discipleship seriously demands of us. It is more pleasant to allow the endless loop of illusion to play in our minds, but we never become the persons we were created to be and we never discover a purpose which truly excites us.

# My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?

## Text

Matthew 27:32-46

## Context

No question in Scripture is more excruciating than the final words of Jesus recorded in both Matthew and Mark. Few doubt that his cry reflects Jesus' full humanity and genuine struggle as the Good Friday drama draws to a close. But we can interpret Jesus' words, which are a quotation of Psalm 22:1, in at least three very different ways. We can hear the cry as utter dereliction, as the apostasy of Jesus losing faith in the face of total absurdity. At the other end of the spectrum, we can hear the quotation as a shorthand confession of absolute faith. Just as the psalm begins in doubt and ends in trust, so we can interpret his cry as Jesus evoking the whole religious tradition out of which he has come. Heard in this way the words are not a confession of despair, but a shout of triumph which all who knew the psalm would understand. Between these extremes of utter despair and confident triumph, the church has traditionally taught a middle course which draws us into the mystery of suffering. The sense of alienation from God is real, yet the cry is offered to God as one from whom we can expect faithfulness. The question is simultaneously an indictment of divine apathy in the face of injustice and a confession of faith because it is offered to God.

## Reflection

I often joke that when I get to heaven my first question to God will be why lettuce, carrots, and celery were a dietary free pass and fried foods were coronary cannonballs. But caloric content is hardly the most troubling mystery of existence. That distinction belongs to the "problem of pain." Christians confess that God is both sovereign and loving, so why is there so much suffering in the world? Books, both scholarly and popular, shoot feeble shafts of light into the great darkness by suggesting that properly appreciating free will, our limited perspective, and the formative value of endurance can make suffering more comprehensible. Those are small consolations when the pain is not an abstraction but our own.

When we encounter those who confess, with defiance or sorrow, that they can not find comfort and meaning in religious faith, we seldom have to probe deeply to find a great wound: "Where was God when I was raped?" "Where was God when that drunk killed my Dad and walked away unscratched?" "Where is God when no gentle virtue goes unexploited by the cynical?" The meek may inherit the earth, but the strong seem to have a long term lease.

Unlike most of the Jesus' questions, this one is not directed toward someone he is teaching or healing, but to God. We do not so much respond to the question as allow it to become our own, giving voice to the fear and doubt we seldom allow into our consciousness because the specter of hopelessness is so terrifying. Praying this question with Jesus allows the thunderstorm of despair which has been oppressively building in our souls finally to break with its full fury. After the crashing is over, perhaps we can hear a still small voice giving evidence that we are not alone after all.

C. S. Lewis' devil, Screwtape, warns his nephew Wormwood, "Our cause is never more in danger, than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's [God's] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."<sup>5</sup> Here is a description of Jesus' response to his great trial. Most of the time there is no quick answer to our anguished cry thrown into the void; there is just will and waiting for hints of hope within the darkness.

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<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, HarperCollins edition 2001 (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 40.

# How Many Loaves Have You?

## Text

Mark 6:32-44

## Context

The early church included at least one feeding miracle in every canonical gospel (Matthew and Mark each have two) and that suggests these stories were particularly significant for the community of faith. Each account is slightly different in language and emphasis, but taken together these stories witness to the power of Jesus, his compassion for those who hunger, and the broad reach of God's concern to all peoples. Most see in the sharing of bread and fish an evocation of the Eucharistic supper which binds all disciples to Jesus and to one another. One great preacher suggested that the reason the feeding miracles were so beloved in the early church was that they spoke to small, besieged communities of faith with the promise that God can do a lot with a little. Though Mark often portrays the disciples as spiritually blind and obtuse, Jesus continually invites them to join him in ministry. In the crowd's hunger the disciples see an insurmountable problem; Jesus sees an opportunity. His question prompts the disciples to discover the resources near at hand, resources which, if given to God, can do amazing things.

## Reflection

In a Hasidic tale Rabbi Zusya says, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"<sup>6</sup> Few things are more crucial to living with joy and fulfillment than discovering who Zusya—or Fred, or Sue, or Akim—really is. We long to express our unique gifts, abilities, and interests, but we fight inexorable pressure to conform to a mold of someone else's making. Who has time for deep discernment? There is a career to launch. We have loans to pay off and parental expectations to honor.

And besides that, we're not so sure we're all that special anyway. Even when we lift our eyes beyond the hedges of conventional expectations to see the panoramic challenges which God might put before us, we are often paralyzed by a myth of scarcity. We think the world's problems are so complex and massive that it needs a new Moses, not the excruciatingly ordinary person we know ourselves to be. We assume someone else got the gifts that really matter. If we speak of our abilities at all, we preface them with "just": "All I can do is just sing a little, or visit the sick, or make some phone calls."

Then Jesus challenges the myth of scarcity. "How many loaves have you got? Look in that bag and I'll bet you can find something I can use to feed the crowd. Look in your heart and I'll bet you'll find both a calling and the gifts to exercise it. In fact, I know you will; I put them there."

It's scary to discover what it means to be Zusya. We resist seeing our gifts because life becomes more than just occupying a prefab niche in society. With eyes open we can not claim ignorance anymore. We know we possess gifts which Jesus needs for the feeding of the world. Scary indeed, but better than knowing you let precious bread mold unused in your pocket.

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<sup>6</sup> Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening For the Voice of Vocation*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 11.

# Do You Love Me?

## Text

John 21:15-19

## Context

Jesus' post-resurrection encounter with Peter by the Sea of Tiberius is like a great symphony, filled with multiple layers of meaning, shading, and tone. Three times Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter says, "Yes." Three times Jesus calls for action. Several themes sound simultaneously through the exchange. We can hear the birth of the church and the commissioning of the apostles to become the embodiment of the love they have experienced in Jesus. In his pointed question Jesus offers Peter an opportunity to reaffirm what he denied three times during Passion Week, and thus the story sounds the hope that, through Christ, reconciliation is possible even after the most heinous betrayal. But for Peter and the reader of the story Jesus' question is also a bugle call to awareness. "Love" is a word made cheap by casual use. The text invites us to pause and reflect on what love is and how we distinguish our loves from illusions.

## Reflection

The questions came during a retreat on personal wellness. "What are five things you most enjoy doing?" the leader asked. I dutifully wrote down five activities. "Now, when was the last time you did each?" It had been long time since I had done several things on my list. That realization led me to some serious reflection on my priorities. If I loved these ways of spending time why was I not doing them?

If we want to know what we actually value, as opposed to what we think we ought to value or would like to value, we have to ask ourselves where we spend time, money, and energy. These are the currency with which we buy a life and our disbursement of them does not lie. The things which get our time, money, and energy are what we love, however we might protest to the contrary.

So when Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" the question concerns the practical matter of how we use the stuff of life, not how mushy our hearts feel at the sound of his name. If we have the courage to hear the question without flinching and respond to it honestly, we may discover that we do not really love Jesus. We thought we did. We would like to. But something is blocking our love.

When we sense that blockage we are on the verge of growing spiritually. Just as a broken friendship has a chance to heal when we can name the offense which caused the breach, so pondering why our heart is cold offers the possibility that it can grow warm. Perhaps we have a grudge against God; we've been through hell and God did not seem to lift a finger to help us. Maybe we have some intellectual reservations about embracing a Jesus whose message seems so at odds with the aggressive, self-possessed values which drive modern life; can such a counter-cultural way really be the source of deepest truth? Possibly we see all too clearly the cost of loving Jesus and are afraid to give our hearts completely. Then again, maybe we just have not taken the time to know this Jesus. In this relationship, as with any other, love grows slowly in the thoughtful silences between our speaking and our listening.

"Do you love me?" The most honest response for all of us is probably, "Not yet, not fully." Jesus already knows our answer; the growth, for Peter and for us, is in facing the question.