

### 3<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER – C (May 1, 2022)

I'm old enough to remember back in the 1960's when the Beatles were by far the biggest rock band in the world. One of their biggest hits was in 1967 with "All You Need is Love"—that title was repeated many times as the refrain, and then turned around to "love is all you need." A nice sentiment, to be sure...but what does it mean? Just what is love?

I raise this question because of the gospel we just heard. The risen Christ appears yet again to the apostles, this time on the Tiberias shore. After Jesus prepares breakfast for them, bread and freshly-caught fish, he has a one-on-one chat with Simon Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter "Do you love me?", and three times Peter replies "yes, Lord, you know that I love you". It has traditionally been thought that Jesus asked this of Peter three times to give Peter a chance to atone for the three times he denied even knowing Jesus after the Last Supper; there seems to be no reason to doubt that tradition at all.

So what does 'love' mean? It's a word we throw around a lot, and we use it in a wide variety of different ways; e.g.:

- "I just love the S'mores blizzard at Dairy Queen!" (you may substitute your own favorite flavor)
- "I love going out for a walk on a warm, sunny spring day (assuming we'll ever get a day like that this spring...)"
- "I love getting together with my family and friends"
- "I love my spouse/child/parents"
- "I love God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit"

"All You Need is Love"—but does 'love' mean the same thing for your favorite Blizzard flavor, the beauty of nature, your family and friends, and God? What kind of love was Jesus asking Peter about? What kind of love did Peter have in mind in his responses?

Some years ago Pope Benedict XVI reflected on this gospel passage in a very interesting way. He reminded us that the Greek language—the language in which John's gospel was first written—has a number of different words that are typically translated into English as 'love'. For example, the Greek word *eros* refers to the physical and sexual attraction that one may feel for another. *Philia* is that kind of love or connection we experience as friendship. It's a tender, close affection, but not to the extent of involving the total gift of oneself to another person. Finally, *agape* is that total, unconditional gift to another, given without reserve or condition of any kind.

These different Greek words which all get translated into English as 'love' certainly lead to a variety of meanings. And it's especially noteworthy that in the first two times that Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, Jesus uses 'agape' in that question: "Simon, do you love me unconditionally, with your whole being?" And in both those cases Peter responds "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you"—but here Peter uses 'philia', what we might call that somewhat 'lower' level of love that we call friendship. Peter no doubt remembered with great remorse his triple denial of even knowing Jesus, and so he humbly acknowledged—as Pope Benedict says—"I love you with my poor human love", only as far as his fragile human love would allow. And when Jesus asked Peter the third time "Do you love me?", Jesus now used that lesser 'philia'

love in his question instead of the ‘agape’ total, unconditional love that he mentioned in his first two questions.

In other words, Jesus brings himself to Peter’s level, to where Peter could fully respond as he was able to. It’s a very tender scene: Jesus affirming his own unconditional love, his ‘agape’, for Peter, despite the latter’s flaws and weaknesses. And after each of those three ‘yes, Lord, I love you’ affirmations from Peter, Jesus affirms three times his mission to Peter to tend and feed his lambs and sheep. Jesus didn’t give up on Peter even if Peter’s love for Jesus was not yet all that it could be. In fact, he gave Peter a new authority to shepherd the whole Church, the People of God. And it’s an authority that has passed on to the successors of Peter as the earthly leaders of the Church Jesus established; the First Vatican Council affirmed that important aspect of the papacy, the role of the pope. What’s more, Jesus warned Peter that he would face suffering and death for Jesus’ sake: “when you grow old...someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go”. In fact, Peter suffered a martyr’s death by crucifixion; his love for Jesus did indeed ultimately rise to that ‘agape’ level of the total gift of himself to the Lord. Finally, Jesus reaffirms his call to Peter to follow him—even if Peter messed up rather badly and more than once.

Peter’s story and example is a great grace and gift to us. If, when we feel unable or unworthy to give ourselves entirely to Jesus with that ‘agape’ kind of love that he really wants from us, remember that Jesus didn’t give up on Peter even when he was unable to do the same. Even if we fall into sin and weakness with regularity, Jesus both challenges and encourages us to love him as he challenged and encouraged Peter—we can almost hear Jesus telling us “follow me; love me as you can, and I will draw you into an ever deeper love for me. Don’t give up! You can do this with my help, if you let me help you.”

Indeed: “All You Need is Love”...but it’s that ‘agape’ love of God, that total, unconditional, holding-nothing-back love of God that we need the most and that he has already given to us. The most famous Bible verse--John 3:16--expresses that kind of love so well: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life.” That is ultimate love, the perfection of ‘agape’ love, beyond which it is impossible for us to go. God grant us the grace to return to him that total, unconditional love that he first extended to us in and through his Son.