

Do You Love Me?

BY BRENT BEASLEY

Being moral persons who are eager to help our fellow humans is very valuable and important. But Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” We know what we are supposed to believe, how to be obedient, and how to be busy at good things. But do we know how to be in love with Jesus?

Should Christian ministers, deacons, and teachers be more like mystics than prophets? “For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required,” Henri Nouwen asserts in his book, *In the Name of Jesus*¹. He explains:

It is not enough for priests and ministers...to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are [they] truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness? (pp. 29-30)

Unfortunately, debates in the Church on issues such as abortion, women in ministry, homosexuality, and euthanasia take place on a primarily moral level, Nouwen laments. Therefore our battles are removed from the experience of God’s love and “seem more like political battles for power than spiritual searches for truth” (pp. 30-31). He argues that it is not enough for Christian leaders to have well-informed opinions on the burning issues of our time; their leadership must be rooted in a contemplative love of God.

After Jesus’ resurrection, Peter and some of the other disciples went fishing. They went out in a boat but failed to catch anything. Then at day-

break, the Gospel of John says, they saw on the beach about a hundred yards away the glow of a charcoal fire and a man standing by it whom at first they did not recognize. The man asked them if they'd had any luck, and when they said they had not, he told them to try throwing their nets off the other side of their boat. This time they were lucky to the tune of a

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hundred and fifty three fish. When they figured out that the man by the fire was Jesus, Peter hurled himself into the water and somehow swam and scrambled his way to shore ahead of everyone else.

Peter's brief conversation with Jesus continues

to haunt me because of the one question that the Lord asked him three times: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:15).

Peter and the other disciples believed in the Resurrection, but they had a hard time figuring out its meaning for their lives and mission. I can relate to that. They were doing their best to obey Jesus' commands; indeed, only when they obeyed what he told them to do—cast their net on the other side—could they recognize Jesus for who he really was. I can relate to that.

Jesus did not ask Peter what he believed about the Resurrection, salvation, the end times, or any other theological issue. He did not even ask Peter how he was doing on being obedient to his commands. Three times he asked Peter one question: "Do you love me?"

"Do you love me?" That question on the lips of Jesus haunts me like no other. "Do you love me?"

I imagine that when I meet Jesus face to face and he asks if I have been obedient, I can reply, "You know, I have not been perfect, but, all in all, I have been pretty good. At least compared with a lot of people, I have done okay. I have not committed any major crimes or been a part of any scandal or anything like that."

And then if Jesus asks me a tough theological question, if he asks what I believe about certain doctrines like the Resurrection or salvation or something like that, I will have it made—four years of religion courses as a college undergraduate, three years of religion courses in seminary, and four years of study for the Doctor of Ministry degree, not to mention going to Sunday school my whole life. I have been preparing my whole life for Jesus to ask me a theological question when I see him face to face. I am ready.

But what if Jesus does not ask me if I have been obedient? What if he does not ask me about what I believe? What if the question Jesus asks is,

“Do you love me?” What am I going to do then? Am I ready for that? Now you see what scares me in this story of Jesus’ encounter with his disciples by the sea.

“Do you love me?” As I read this biblical story, I realize that I know what I am supposed to believe, I know how to be obedient, I know how to be busy at good things, and I have well-informed opinions on the burning ethical issues of our day. But I do not know how to be in love with Jesus.

Being moral persons who are eager to help our fellow humans is very valuable and important. But Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” In other words, are we mystics? Do we practice the presence of God?

Henri Nouwen presses the point: the focus of our lives must be “the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, ‘Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?’ It is the discipline of contemplative prayer” (p. 28).

The ancient church told this story about prayer:

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him: “Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and, again as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then, the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him: “If you really want, you can become all flame.”²

Why are we satisfied with anything less than becoming all flame in our love for God? We must, as Nouwen says, move on from the moral to the mystical.

About 10:00 P.M. one evening, I was sitting downstairs by myself when I heard my five-year-old daughter Ivy’s loud whisper from upstairs: “Daddy, Daddy?” My daughter’s quiet voice is louder than most people’s loud voice.

“What?”

“Will you come tuck me in?”

It had been a very busy day. I had worked hard at the office. And because my wife had a class that evening, I had picked up Ivy and our son Sam from school and made dinner for us. Well, to be truthful, I had removed the Chick-Fil-A nuggets from a bag, put them on the table, squirted out the ketchup, and so on.

“See that Sam does his homework. Get the kids in the bath. Go upstairs to get them in bed. Close the shutters. Pull back their comforters and sheets. Help get the right cat in the right bedroom—Nash to Sam’s and Betty to Ivy’s. Turn off the lights. Tell Sam goodnight. Tell Ivy goodnight.” My checklist was completed.

My wife had come home and gone to bed, and I was settling into the couch to watch SportsCenter when I heard Ivy’s loud whisper: “Daddy, Daddy? Will you come tuck me in?”

“No. I already tucked you in an hour ago,” I whispered back. “Go to bed.”

She began to cry and said, “I just want you to tuck me in.”

What she was trying to say, what she would have said if she were able, is this: “Yes, you picked me up from school today, got me dinner, started my bath, pulled back my covers, turned out my light, and put my cat Betty in my room. I know you’ve been busy and done a lot of good things on my behalf, but do you love me?”

Jesus asked Peter one question three times: “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” There is a lot more to the story. This is not even the main point of this story. This is only the beginning. But I cannot get past that one question.

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

NOTES

1 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 32. Further citations will be in the text.

2 Joseph of Panephysis 7, from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. This translation is in John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), 100-101.



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