

My friends in Christ...my dad loves fresh salmon smoked on the Traeger...and he loves his best friends...and he loves his wife, my mom...and he loves God.... He has all of this love, and yet even though he *loves* them all, we *obviously* know that he does *not* love them in quite the same way, to the same degree. If my dad loves smoked salmon as much as he loves God, then Houston we have a problem – because he just ought not be idolizing smoked salmon!

Mydad has all kinds of love going on in his life. And for me, it is just such a tragedy that the English language only has *one* word for “love” with which to describe these different kinds of love.

Now I mention all of that because in our Gospel text today from Saint John, there is lots of love happening in the second half of this Gospel scene between Jesus and Peter. Three times, Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love Me?” And three times Peter answers, “You know that I love You.” Now what exactly is going on here? Why the repetition? And what *exactly* does love *mean* in this context?

First, why the repetition? Why does the Lord ask Peter *not* once, *not* twice, but *three* times if he loves Him? Well, we remember that Peter *denied* the Lord three times; he denied three times not only that he *loves* Him but that he even *knows* Him. “Do you love Him?” “*Certainly* not!” “Do you even *know* Him?” “No, I do not.”

And so, by denying three times that he even *knows* Jesus (let alone that he *loves* Jesus), Peter in fact *sinned* three times.

And now, today’s Gospel text. Peter has gone to the Lord on the shore much as a penitent goes to a priest in the confessional. The sin: denying the Lord three times. And now the penance: telling the Lord three times *not* that he *denies* Him...but that he *loves* Him.

And *that* is the reason why for this three-fold repetition about Peter’s love for Jesus.... But what exactly does love *mean* in this context? And to begin to answer *this* question, we return to my lament about how the English language is severely lacking with regard to linguistic expressions for the various kinds of love that we humans experience. We have only *one* word for “love,” yet there

are no fewer than *four* different meanings that we attach to that *one* word for love. There is clearly something lost in translation here. We remember that the original language in which this text was composed was (*obviously!*) *not* English...that Saint John wrote his Gospel narrative in what was the prevailing language of his time and place: Greek. And ancient Greek is a *very* robust language; in terms of sheer quantity of words, it is an extraordinarily *large* language indeed. Such that whereas English has only *one* word for “love,” ancient Greek has *four*: *storge*; *philia*; *eros*; and *agape*.

That love for smoked salmon, for a beautiful sunset, for a favorite song or movie – they are all instances of *storge*; *storge* is that very surface-level affection for what strikes us in the moment, and an anticipation of some sort of emotional or physical satisfaction of some desire. I will eat the tasty smoked salmon; I will watch the beautiful sunset; I will listen to my favorite song.

And then there is the love called *philia*. This is friendship. Hence Philadelphia – the city of brotherly love. I love my best friend.

And then there is the love called *eros*. This is *erotic* love; that is, marital love, the love of man and woman, husband and wife. Friendship might well be visualized as two friends standing side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, both of them facing the same trial, working toward the same goal. Love of man and woman (marital love; the marital embrace) might well be visualized as two lovers facing one another – not shoulder-to-shoulder, but face-to-face.

And finally, there is *agape*. In Latin, *caritas*; in English...well, *love*, but also *charity*. It is a love that is perfect...whole-hearted...self-sacrificial...pure *giving*, with not even a single *thought* about the *receiving* in return. Descartes famously said: “I think; therefore, I am.” Well, Christ probably would say something similar: “I *give*...*because* I AM.”

And this is *precisely* the high, high calling to which the Lord calls us because *agape* is a perfect, whole-hearted, self-sacrificial, pure gift. It is perfect...and it is holy...*because* it is of God. “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” And “be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

We return once more to our Gospel text. Jesus asks Peter, “Do you *love* Me?” Jesus speaks the word *agape* when He asks this question, such that what He *really* is asking Peter is this: “Do you love Me, Peter, with that same perfect, whole-hearted, self-sacrificial, pure gift of love with which I loved *you* when I suffered and died on the Cross for you?” Jesus is asking Peter for perfection and holiness when He asks this question using *agape* for “love.”

And Peter answers, “You know that I love You.” But he does *not* use the word *agape* in this response; rather, he speaks the word *philia*. And so, we might re-translate this entire scene like this:

Jesus: “Do you love Me, Simon Peter, with that same perfect, whole-hearted, self-sacrificial, pure gift of love with which I have loved *you* when I suffered and died on the Cross for you?”

Peter: “Woah! Chill out, bro! I love you like a *friend*, come on!”

Later on, Jesus tries again. “Do you *agape* Me?” “You know that I *philia* You.” (By the way, that just sounds *weird!* No wonder we have just one word for “love” in English!)

And now, the crucial *third* time when Jesus tries once more. “Peter, do you love Me...like a friend?” *Philia*. And Peter answers, “You know *everything*, You know that I love You like a friend.”

Having tried *twice* to call Peter up to the highest form of love (only to have Peter respond in a noble, though lesser, form of love), Jesus now this *third* time brings it down to Peter’s level. Jesus stoops down, condescends, to encounter Peter where Peter is. Jesus wants *agape*...but for now, He settles for *philia*. He does *not* say, “Well I want Peter to love Me with a perfect, whole-hearted, self-sacrificial, pure gift of love, but he keeps giving Me mere friendship instead – so, forget about it! I want nothing more to do with him!” No, He does *not* say *that*; rather, it is His infinitely loving and merciful response to reach down to where Peter is, so that, in due time, He might raise Peter up to where *He* is – where He wants *Peter* to be *also*. “So that where I am,” Jesus says, “you *also* may be.”

Jesus earlier preached the parable of the Good Shepherd and the lost sheep; well, *He* is the Good Shepherd, and in this instance, *Peter* is the lost sheep. And Jesus goes totally out of His way,

condescends, stoops down (like He did when He, the King of kings, was born in the manger...like He did when He suffered and died the humiliating execution of a common criminal)... He stoops down to where Peter is, when Peter is not yet *able* (or *perhaps* even not yet *willing*) to be raised up to where Jesus wants him to be.

But notice that Jesus does not let Peter *remain* there; He might have asked for *agape* and got only *philia* instead, but notice the final words of this Gospel text: “Follow Me.” Jesus went out of His way to encounter *Simon* Peter...but that was so that He could raise him up – thus to empower *Simon* Peter to become *Saint* Peter.

And thus Jesus wants and wills to do for *us*, as well. In *our* brokenness, in *our* woundedness, in *our* sin, in *our* need for grace and love, healing and mercy...Jesus comes to us, that He might then lead us to Him. He encounters us where we are, that He might raise us up to where He wants us to be. He loves us, yes, precisely for who we are now...*and* for who He wants us to be, and wills us to be, and has created us to be. We are sinners *now*, wounded *now*, broken *now*...and Jesus comes to us so that we might be *healed* now, and *restored* now, and thus be *completely* transformed, now *and* forever, from *sinners*...into *saints*.

May it be, then, that we, like Saint Peter, would profess our love for Jesus Christ, as perfect or imperfect as our love for Him might be right now...and that we would allow Him to raise us up to where He *wants* us and *wills* for us to be: that place of refreshment, light, and peace...our home forever in halls of heavenly realms.