

**Do You Love as God Loves?**     Seventh Week of Easter     Friday, May 18, 2018     7:30 PM  
Acts 25:13b-21;     **Jn 21:15-19**     (St. John I, pope and martyr)     (Healing Mass)  
(God is asking us to love his Church, to love his sheep and his lambs.)

**“When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”**

This sounds like assisted-living. Actually this story, this text, is a little bit problematic. In English it sounds different from the Greek. Now I’m not going to read you the Greek, but in the Greek New Testament there are three different words for love, and that’s because **there are three really different aspects of love, and the Greek language defines this better than English.**

So there’s *Eros*, which is the basic love that everyone has: wanting to move out, move up, succeed, do something with oneself, mate, have children. That’s *Eros*; **it’s creative.** It’s a wonderful and very important quality in the human nature. But then there’s another word for God’s love, which is really very different. *Eros* is coming from the bottom and **it wants to rise up, improve, expand, multiply**; but that’s not God. That’s not God’s love. God’s love is very different.

**God’s love in fact is actually very mysterious because here God is loving what is beneath him in the sense that God made it.** The earth is beautiful. The universe is remarkable, but actually the idea that God loves all this is actually quite surprising. We are just used to hearing it. We ought to meditate on this. God actually loves creation that he has made, but he even loves the world, and by “world” it means people who have turned away from God. That’s the world, especially in the Fourth Gospel. But God loves the world. **“God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son that the world may not perish.”** This is not *Eros*; this is something else. It’s profoundly different. And it’s called in Greek *Agape*. Now the word existed before the gospels; the gospels use it in this very specifically Christian way. **It involves the love for the poor and the love of the weak**, which Nietzsche understood very well and despised. He thought loving the weak was stupid, so he hated Christianity. But for a good reason. He understood what it meant and he didn’t believe it; he didn’t accept this fundamental value of loving what is weak or broken or sinful or corrupt or depraved or sick. But that’s what God does. And God so loved the world that he sent his very own Son into the world.

Now here is the Son speaking, and it is after the resurrection. He is saying to Peter, **“Agapas me? Do you love me” the way God loves?** which is really an odd question. It’s so odd that many

scholars simply ignore it, as if he didn't really say this or as if he really just, well, the evangelist used the wrong word. I don't think so; I think the evangelist is very smart. I think the evangelist is always playing with words, and I think the evangelist wants the Church, the disciples, to understand something very profound, so he has Jesus use this very word. Jesus of course didn't speak Greek normally. I mean he didn't speak Greek; he spoke Aramaic. So this is the evangelist clarifying something for us, for future generations. "Agapas me, Do you love me?" It doesn't make a lot of sense; **why would he use that word? Because the "me" is not Jesus; the "me" is the lambs.** Just as when Paul, Saul, was on the road to Damascus and he was blinded by a light and he heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" it's the same "me." It's the lambs; it's the sheep. That's what Jesus is saying, "Agapas me?" Do you love my lambs? Do you love my sheep? Do you love my poor? Do you love my people? Do you love my broken disciples? That's why the word is used, *Agapas me*.

But Peter doesn't get it, not only because he didn't get Greek, but because **Peter is all of us, and we don't quite understand what God is asking of us.** So he responds you are my buddy, "*Philo se*." You know, *philo se*, I love you. Phila is like Philadelphia, brotherly love, you are my brother, I love you, you are my "bestest friend." But that's not what Jesus asked him. So he asked him again, "Agapas me?" Peter still doesn't get the answer. He says, "*Philo se*," I love you like a brother, you are my very "bestest friend." So Jesus more or less gives up and says, "*Philes me*?" Do you love me as a brother? And then Peter says, "You know that I love you," and he is upset. Well of course this is the evangelist writing this, and in a way staging it for our benefit.

So we understand that **God is asking us to love his Church, to love his sheep and his lambs.** St. Augustine says Peter is of course the first apostle, but as head of the Church he is the whole Church too. So when Jesus is saying, "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep," he is really saying that to the whole Church. **So the Church is both the apostolic minister and it is also the ones who are ministered to.** And by extension Jesus intends everyone to become his sheep and his lambs. He said in another text, "I have other sheep not of this flock." They are all over the world. And he is asking the Church, the ministries of the Church, those who are capable and able to reach out, to tend, to feed others, to be there for him, the Shepherd, to extend his shepherding care and concern, which is for even the wicked world, **to extend that care to even the wicked world, and bring everything to God.** This is the **universal salvific will of God.**

That's one thing **our Catholic Church has always insisted on, is that God desires the salvation of everyone.** Whether this will actually be accomplished, we do not know—we do not know, but that God desires it, we do know. **God doesn't have special people he has elected.** The word “elect” used in prayers refers to those people who have chosen to be with God. And in the First Eucharist Prayer we pray that we will be included among the elect, and we know very well that that's God's intention and desire that we are all included among the elect. How sad even to consider the possibility that we would reject his choice of us, although we do believe we are free to do so—we are free to do so. **Grace is not irresistible.** And yet **Jesus is now begging all the people who hear this gospel to help him be shepherd to the whole world** because the world is the ultimate object of the love of God. “God so loved the world, and he sent his only begotten Son that the world may have life.” So this is a great mystery of God's love.

And most people don't ever really understand it. And it's not because it's so difficult because they can't read Greek. It's that they really don't pray the Scriptures enough. **We need to take the Scriptures and sit with them and let them teach us.** The Holy Spirit is our teacher. Jesus said that. “The Holy Spirit will teach you everything,” only we have to give the time to the Spirit to teach us. We can learn by praying, by listening, and we can grow in a great appreciation of *agape*, the unconditional, unasked for, unbelievable love that God has for each and everyone, the whole world, the wickedest as well as the most holy. There's nothing we can do to push it away, to make God love us less, nothing. **Nothing we do will make God love us less. On the other hand, nothing we do will make God love us more.** What we do, we do out of a willingness and a desire to please God and to return something for all the wonderful gifts God gives us, starting with life itself. And **as we reach out in love and service of others, we find that that outreach itself is a window and a door opening up all kinds of blessings for us.** And the more we pray, the more we realize that the person we have been trying to create all our lives is really just a stage in something that God is creating, something far greater, more beautiful, more lovely, more holy, more desirable, more intelligent, more worthy than anything we can do. But we can desire to be worthy of God's work, and we can reach out to others tending his sheep and feeding his lambs.