

DO YOU LOVE ME?

I do not know if what I am about to say has been revealed to us by God but it is something that I have heard referenced at various times throughout my 46 years as a priest. It has to do with the same question Jesus asked Simon Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that day. “Simon, do you love me?” Three times Jesus asked—in slightly different ways. Three times he was answered by Peter in exactly the same way each time.

What I have heard about is that each person, at the very end of his or her life, will be asked the same question by the Lord immediately before they die. “Do you love me?” If we say “yes” we allow ourselves to be welcomed into the embrace of God—for all eternity—either immediately or after a period of purification. If we say “No” the Lord will still reach out to embrace us BUT we will hate it! That is what we refer to as hell. In the end, it will be my call about living in the embrace of God and loving it or hating it. In the end God affirms the gift of freedom given once and for all! In the end as we hand back to the Lord our gift of freedom we are given one last opportunity to accept his way and live in harmony with Him and his People. And we will be asked, as Peter was, three times, before we die.

When Jesus hears Peter’s response he says the same thing each time. “Feed my sheep.” We can hear these words right now as if they are addressed primarily to Peter as the first Pope and the sheep are the people of God entrusted to the apostle’s care. But there is more in this gospel passage. It is a question asked of you and me too. Who are his sheep? All of us. All human beings are his sheep. Jesus said, “I have other sheep who are not of this flock.” Not of this flock perhaps but still part of his flock. His response to Peter is “Feed my sheep.” “Tend my sheep.” See to their needs. Help them out. Give them nourishment.

Who? It really isn’t a question of a specific ‘Who’ Jesus is referring to. If I have the love for Jesus in my heart, if I really do love him as I have just professed in answer to his question, then whoever the person before me, in whatever circumstances, is the person I should feed or tend to their needs. If my heart is a loving heart, a nurturing heart, a caring heart then each person I encounter will be treated that way.

If I love Our Lord then it must also be true that I love all those who are his and dear to him. There can be no exceptions. I cannot love only some people, some of the time. I cannot love only the good people. I must feed each person and tend to

each person with the love that is in my heart. I cannot pick and choose. And if that means I must forgive then I must forgive. After all I myself have BEEN forgiven already by Christ. I too have denied the Lord at times like Peter did but the Lord has offered me another chance to make right my fearful response. I too must offer to others the same opportunity. It is all of a piece.

Sometimes it sounds so difficult. Sometimes it feels so impossible. But we can do all that the Lord wants us to do if we really turn to him and ask for his help. We must tell the Lord we love him. We must listen to his word counselling us to tend his sheep. And we must ask for the help we need to be the men and women he knows we can be.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.