

24th Sunday Ordinary Time: Sept. 15-16, 2018
St. Mary Catholic Church
Fr. Michael Renninger

“Do you love me?”

+ “Of course I do.”

“Then how can you leave me?”

Several years ago, a friend of mine recounted a conversation she’d had with her former husband.

Theirs had been a fairytale romance. The bride and groom were beautiful, athletic, smart. A big church wedding, a honeymoon in Tahiti. Perfect jobs.

She had some health issues, so no children were born in the first years. Still, they seemed like a golden couple.

Until... she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And as she planned how to deal with this new medical reality, she felt her husband starting to pull away.

Yes, every night he did what he had always done – he kissed her and said “I love you.” But during the day, there was distance, and silence.

Then came the day when he announced that he was leaving. She did not know what to say, so she asked him, “Do you love me?”

He responded, “Of course I love you. I always will.”

She pleaded, “well, then how can you leave me if you love me?”

And he said, “I *love* you, but I did not sign up to take care of you.”

That’s what he said. And as I listened to his former wife, years later, she said, “When I asked him if he loved me, he got the *answer* right, but he got the *meaning* wrong.”

Sadly, I think this happens frequently. How many people get the answer right, but the meaning wrong? How many people say things like:

- + Of course I love you... but that doesn't mean I should forgive you
- + of course I love you... but I can't be patient with your imperfections
- + Of course I love you... but that doesn't mean I'll sacrifice for you
- + Of course I love you... but that doesn't mean I will tell you the truth
- + of course I love the poor ... but that doesn't mean I'll feed them
- + of course I love unborn babies ... but that doesn't mean I'll stand up for them
- + of course I love our country... but that doesn't mean I'll serve it or work on its behalf
- + of course I love the Lord... but that doesn't mean I'm going to really live the Gospel

We get the *answer* right, but we get the *meaning* wrong.

And so does St. Peter in today's Gospel passage!

Remember where we are in Mark's Gospel. The disciples of Jesus have been with him for a while now. They've heard him preach and teach. They experienced the miracles. They've marveled at the healings. The crowds have seen this too.

In today's passage, Jesus takes his apostles on a long, hot walk north to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus sits them down and says: "Ok. We've been at this for a while now. What are you hearing? What are people saying? Who do people say that I am?"

There are lots of different answers. There always are when you listen to a crowd.

Then Jesus asks the more probing question: "OK. *You*. You've been with me night and day. You've seen and heard everything. Who do *you* say that I am?"

Who do you say that I am?

That's the question.

And Peter *gets the answer right*. "You are the Christ." For a Jewish person of that era, this is the most shocking thing that Peter could say. It was an extraordinary profession of faith.

Peter was saying, 'I believe that you are the messiah. The one promised by God. The savior that Israel has been waiting for for centuries. I believe that you are the one sent by God. And that through you, God's love will work in order to save God's people.'

"You are the Christ," Peter said. 'Through you, God's love will be revealed, and God will save his people.'

Peter got the answer right. But he got the meaning wrong.

Yes, God's love IS definitively revealed in Jesus Christ. Yes, God's love is working through this messiah to save the people.

But when Peter thought about God's love at work in the messiah, what he envisioned was this: He envisioned King David, on steroids.

What do I mean? Well, in the memory of the Jewish people, David was the greatest king. He was a political powerhouse, a military genius. He knew how to get things done.

When Peter thought about God's love working through the messiah, he expected the messiah to be like superman. In Peter's mind, God's love looked like military victories, Israel's enemies crushed, Israel's glory restored. Financial success for everyone. A chicken in every pot. Diseases healed. Peace and power in the land.

As Peter envisions the meaning of God's love at work in the messiah, this is what he has in mind.

Yes, Peter, you got the answer right. Jesus *is* the Christ. But you got the meaning wrong.

Jesus challenges Peter to understand things differently. Jesus challenges Peter to understand that love, even God's love, is about sacrifice, not triumph. It is about selflessness, not selfishness. It is about service, not being served.

God's love, as revealed in the messiah, is not about a crown – it's about a cross. It is not about a throne - it is about washing feet. It's not about a monument made of marble – it's about a tomb near Calvary.

Peter, you got the answer right, but you got the meaning wrong. God's love, our love, authentic love, is always about sacrifice, the willingness to suffer, the call to give without counting the cost.

This is the meaning of the messiah. This is the charisma of the Christ. This the truth that Peter missed.

“Who do *you* say that I am?”

Who do you say that Jesus is? If I had time to ask different people in this church, I suspect that

you would give a variety of answers. And all of them would probably be true – up to a point.

With our words, we may get the answer right. But as Peter discovered, it takes a lifetime to truly grasp the meaning.

Who is Jesus?

He is God's love in the flesh, which means:

- + he is the one who reveals to us that we are God's beloved children, even when other voices tell us we are unlovable.
- + he is the one who reveals that everything is forgiven. Everything.
- + He is the one who reveals that your life has value and meaning and purpose, even when you can't see it
- + he is the one who is present in your neighbor, which means that, yes, you must love your neighbor as yourself
- + is the one who forgave the men who crucified him, so yes he really meant it when he said that we must forgive 70 times 7
- + he is the one whose face is seen in every unborn child, every abused child, every hungry child, every immigrant child
- + he is the one whose face is seen in the runaway, the addicted teen, the frightened young adult
- + he is the one whose face is seen in our prisons, our hospitals, our nursing homes
- + he is the one whose face is seen in the person sitting next to you, the person you struggle to like, the person you would rather ignore
- + he is the one who demands that we, his people, act with justice and tell the truth – especially in the church, especially now, especially to protect children
- + he is the one who conquered death, and rose to life

That's who he is. That's who is present to us, in the Word, and at the table. Do you love him? Well, don't just get the answer right. Get the *living* right.