
To Feed, To Dance, To Sing!

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The Third Sunday of Easter - Year C

"Do you love me? Feed my sheep."

Grace to you, and peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord! I bring you grace, especially, from the people of my home parish, the Cathedral of St. Philip, in Atlanta, Georgia. And I especially welcome the grace represented by my fellow deans from cathedrals across North America, gathered here at the National Cathedral for the annual North American Conference of Cathedral Deans. We are grateful for the hospitality of the Dean of this cathedral, my old friend Sam Lloyd, and his wife, Marguerite; and I thank the Bishop of Washington, John Chane, another old friend.

When Sam Lloyd invited me to preach today, he mentioned that he was asking me because I "have been doing this dean thing for quite a while." And he's right. I have been dean for quite a while, for sixteen years, for two different cathedrals, two different cities, and "at last count" for six or seven different bishops.

Six or seven different bishops! If you count people who were elected bishop but not consecrated, I have worked with seven different bishop types. (If you count standing committees, who were canonically in charge when the bishop's office was vacant, well.)

This morning, I want to talk first about being a dean in the Episcopal Church. It is simple. Being dean of a cathedral is about dancing. And the first dance that captures our curiosity is the dance between bishop and dean. We have all heard that the relationship between dean and bishop can be awkward, notoriously so. Every cathedral has some variation in its governance, and every dean and bishop is different. What is the same is that successful deans and bishops know how to dance with each other.

But deans dance with a lot of people. We dance with congregations. We dance with cities. We dance with bishops. We dance with churches outside the country. We dance with persons outside the Church. We move from step to step. Sometimes we lead. Sometimes we follow. We look beautifully elegant one moment. The next moment we stumble in the mud. Sometimes we go where we wish; sometimes we go where we do not wish.

I mention dancing today because I think Jesus and Peter knew how to dance with each other. I do not mean walking on the water and then sinking in the water. I mean all their delightful and passionate negotiations between initiative and obedience. Perhaps the most curious example of their "dancing" is this famous "feed my sheep" passage in today's gospel, when Peter and Jesus do a little linguistic dance with each other.

Many of you here this morning are churchgoers, and you have probably heard the story before. After breakfast one day,

Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my lambs." Then the interchange is repeated. A second time, Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter says, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Tend my sheep."

Finally, a third time Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" He is starting to sound like a teenaged lover at the dance. This time, Peter feels hurt because Jesus has asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" Peter says, "Lord, you know everything; you know I love you." Jesus says a third time, "Feed my sheep."

Those of you who have heard comment on this passage over the years, probably know that this conversation is actually a bit more complicated than the translation indicates. Since the beginning of Christendom, we have noted that Jesus and Peter are actually using different Greek words for "love." When Jesus asks Peter the first two times about loving him, Jesus is using the lofty, divine word for "love," the word *agape*. But Peter is responding, "Yes I love you," with another word for love, the Greek word *phileo*.

"Do you love me with divine, self-giving love?" Jesus is asking Peter. Peter is responding, "Yes, I love you with brotherly love." At the third question, Jesus actually changes to *phileo*, -brotherly love, instead of divine love" and, according to some, this is what hurts Peter.

Might there be some hidden meaning in the contrast between the two words? Some Dan Brown secret? Yes, there could be. C. S. Lewis wrote a masterpiece describing four different Greek words for love; it was the book, *The Four Loves*. For Lewis, each word for love has a holy component.

But what makes this linguistic dance such a delight is that the word "love" is not the only word used in two different ways in the passage. In this marvelous passage, there are not only two different words used for "love," but also two different words used for "sheep" or "lambs," and two different words used for the verb "to know," and even two different words used for "tend" or "feed." If we are not careful, we will trip over all sorts of translations here. Or we can be so confused we will sit in our chairs like wallflowers.

No. I am among those who believe that there is no hidden meaning in the various translations of the word "love" here, or in the other words either. It is a dance with many steps; sometimes the feet go one way, and sometimes the feet go another way.

When Peter heard Jesus ask the question, "Do you love me?" he probably heard every note and overtone and variation of meaning that the word contained. And he saw every hue in the color of love. Every minister of the gospel, every follower of God, whether you are lay person, deacon, priest, or bishop, hears that same question: "Do you love me?" And it is fair; it is part of the dance, to interpret that question in all sorts of ways.

Every one of us, even when we have studied the classical definitions"eros, *agape*, *phileo*, *storge*"has a different definition of what it means to love. No matter how we interpret the question, the directive of Jesus is the same: Feed my sheep. Take care of my people. Love my people. No matter how we might trip and tangle ourselves in the question, the directive of Jesus is the same. Feed my sheep. No matter how many web sites and news sources we visit, the directive of Jesus is the same. Feed my sheep.

Remember, everyone in this room is a minister. Everyone in this room is called to feed somebody. But we will all feed differently. Some of you feed with exquisite recipes and fine spices. Some of you feed with the latest in nutritious organics. Some of you feed with the same delightful dishes your mother, your grandmother, taught you long ago

Good cooking is like good dancing. It doesn't happen by magic. It takes work. It takes exercise. It takes practice. Cooking does not come without knowing ingredients and chemistry - how this taste reacts with that spice, how long it takes for bread to rise. "Feed my sheep" means taking the time to learn how to do it well.

Feeding others, like dancing, then, is really an art. From the basic moves and skills, one composes a masterpiece.

I actually don't cook very well, though I sure love to do it. My wife says I don't dance very well, either; but I sure love to do

it. Personally, my art is music; and every musician knows that, first, we learn our scales. Jazz is wonderful that way. Jazz requires me to learn my scales and then play from my heart. (That's also a lot like being a priest.) It is an art.

In this city, politics, at its best, is the art. I am aware that, earlier this week, some forty-seven heads of state were negotiating here, dancing maybe, in the interest of nuclear security and peace.

We live for those moments when that mysterious mix of practice and love reaches a certain point that we call Spirit. You know that moment when the meal becomes exquisite, when the dancers are suddenly exalted, when the music transports our souls, when politics actually becomes beloved community. We call those moments holy. We call that point life-giving.

T. S. Eliott called it, "the dance along the artery, at the still point, there the dance is,"

It takes a lot of love to learn the scales, to learn the steps, to learn the recipes. That's why Christians do so much better when we actually love something. Christians do better when we love to dance, when we love to cook, when we love to feed""when we love our people, when we love Jesus.

"Feed my sheep" is the directive of Jesus for anyone, anyone, who wants to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and Peter. "Do you love me?" Jesus asked. "Do you love God?"

Then feed somebody. And feed them well. Learn about recipes and tastes. And learn about nutrition! Feed people with something worthwhile!

Do you love God? Then sing with somebody. Practice your scales. Use your head. And then let your heart go free!
Do you love God? Then dance with somebody. Learn some steps together. Learn to give and to take, to lead and to follow.

Dance with congregations and cities, local dioceses and oversea missions. Feed families and lovers. It doesn't matter which word for love that you use. Love God and love your neighbor.

AMEN.

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