

At weddings we often hear St. Paul writing “Love is patient, love is kind ... it does not brood over injury ... It bears all things ... hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” Jesus shows this in today’s Gospel in his patient love with his apostles.

It mentions this was the third appearance of Jesus to his apostles. Now Jesus’s Resurrection had given them a positive outlook on life, on suffering and death. They recognize Jesus is Good News. But they’re not quite ready yet to be his messengers, to change their jobs, to make a career change. They’re still at the crossroads.

It’s human nature to be hesitant. I think of my career changes over the years. Each time, I wanted to make a change, and I also didn’t want to make a change, because of the unknown future. You hold back for awhile. Just like we hear in this gathering of apostles. They’ve returned to work they know and are comfortable with: fishing. It’ll take more appearances of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, for them to make the leap into missionary work.

Jesus shows his patient love by making breakfast for his friends and never bringing up the past. When he takes Peter aside for a private talk, he doesn’t demand an apology, or chew him out for denying him. Jesus just asks “Do you love me?”

This Gospel is written in Greek, and Greek has about a half-dozen different words for love, each with a different meaning; but in English they’re all translated “love.” In this question and answer exchange between Jesus and Peter, Jesus uses one Greek word for love and Peter uses another.

Jesus first asks Peter for his unconditional love. Peter responds that he has a brotherly love for him. The second time it’s the same Q & A. But the third time, Jesus asks Peter if he loves him in a brotherly way, and Peter affirms that. Jesus brings it down to Peter’s level. Peter wasn’t confident enough that his love for Jesus was unconditional after he had denied knowing Jesus 3 times, but he was sure about the brotherly love he offered. Peter didn’t let his sin create distance between him and our Lord he loved, and Jesus didn’t let Peter’s lesser love interfere, either.

God wants to be loved, but only when it’s freely offered. Jesus asks all of us disciples for complete and unconditional love, but he also realizes our weaknesses and failings. Peter’s example of offering a lesser love to Jesus gives us hope: that sinners can be part of Jesus’s mission, that we don’t have to be perfect; and that we are forgiven. We know, like Peter did, that there are moments when we haven’t loved Jesus, and moments where we haven’t loved him as much as we should. But the love we can muster is enough for Jesus, if it’s from our hearts, if it’s firm, and wants to grow and never lose ground.

So Jesus doesn’t order us to love him. He coaxes us to love him. Patiently. We can tell Jesus “Yes, but ...” and it’s okay. We can have desires, fears, distractions and struggles that limit our love for him now. He meets us at our level, like he did with Peter, and he will coax a greater love out of us if we let him, like Peter did.

When Jesus calls our name, and asks us, “Do you love me?” how do we answer? Jesus wants to make up for the love that’s lacking in us, so we can be free for loving service to others. He coaxes us to love him more by self-giving, by using our natural talents and aptitudes to the best of our ability, the things we can do and do well, and using them for the other sheep of his flock. That’s how we show we love the shepherd: by taking an interest in others, helping and encouraging them when they’re hesitant or discouraged, to develop their talents and their love for God.

Fr. John Ozella, Third Sunday of Easter, May 5, 2019