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The psalms were songs, at least some of them were; *song* is what the word, *psalm*, means, which is why specific instruments are sometimes spelled out before or within the psalm. It makes sense that they would have been songs and thus their words more easily memorized. Think of how a child learns poems through simple songs, “Old McDonald Had a Farm” or “Hickory-Dickery-Dock,” or in more modern eras, “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” or “It’s Not That Easy Being Green.” This ease of remembering words when we hear them set to music probably explains how I sometimes remember lyrics from songs I have not heard since the 1950’s.

And so I hope it is understandable that very often when I am reading the Lectionary passages as I plan a sermon, something about one of the passages will suggest a song to me.

This week was one of those weeks, but the first song I want to mention was not the song that first came to mind and led me to my title for today; the song I want to mention first occurs when Tevye, the lead character in “Fiddler on the Roof,” addresses his wife, Golde, asking somewhat the same question Jesus thrice addresses to Peter in our Gospel reading: “Do you love me?” And God works in mysterious ways, because Golde’s answer will, I think, help me to get across one of the two messages I have today.

And that is because it poses an answer to the *first* song that our Gospel lesson brought to my mind, one I had not heard since the early 1960’s — and then only on an Andy Williams album someone had loaned me for a college summer break, — and only in preparing this sermon did I learn that it was a Billie Holliday song:

“You don’t know what love is.” That title, “You don’t know what love is,” does state an important part of the message in our somewhat packed Gospel lesson this morning, in which Jesus three times asks Peter a variation of “Do you love me?” And three times Peter gives an affirmative answer. Seems like a boring passage, doesn’t it?

I think not, but to grasp there is more we have to look more deeply into what Jesus was saying, and I am afraid that I am going to have to resort again to something I discussed during Lent, the different words for love in what is known as the *koine* Greek in which the New Testament was written.

I presented these three concepts: *eros*, *philiōs*, and *agape*. *Eros* is the kind of love of which Billie Holliday sang; *philiōs*, as I have described, conveys the idea of what we would call *brotherly* love, or *fellowship*, *even affection*. *Agape*, ah, *agape*, that is a selfless love that goes beyond fellowship.

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I repeat this topic of Greek words for “love” because in English I believe we miss something within our Gospel passage. With a smidgen of Greek, let’s look again:

Jesus: Do you *agape* me more than these others do?

Peter: Yes, Lord, you know I *phili*os you.

Jesus: Feed my lambs.

Jesus: Do you *agape* me?

Peter: Yes, Lord, you know I *phili*os you.

Jesus: Tend my sheep.

Jesus: Do you *phili*os me?

Peter: (Peter felt hurt, we are told) Lord, you know everything, you know that I *phili*os you.”

Jesus: Feed my sheep.

I would be the last to argue that the words passed down to us through verbal reports of witnesses to unknown recorders that eventually end up in what we have in our Bible are necessarily exactly what Jesus or others said, and the passage we read is internally inconsistent, because Peter’s hurt feelings are said to arise “because Jesus said to him the third time, “Do you *phili*os me?” when the first two questions differed.

So maybe what I have to say is grasping at a message the writer did not intend to deliver, but I would like to draw two different messages of *what love is* as I believe Jesus intended from the Greek of the Gospel of John as we have it.

The first takes me all the way back to the Hebrew and a concept I repeatedly try to explain, *fear* God. *Fear God* does not mean, “be afraid of,” but rather, “revere,” “be in awe of” God. This is different from, “What a friend we have in Jesus”; the exchange between Jesus and Peter suggests that Jesus is seeking to be loved in a way quite different from “friend” or “brother,” a word almost compelled by the term that Peter uses, “Lord.” Friendship and fellowship, manifestations of *phili*os, are wonderful, as I have several times hastened to state; they truly enrich life, but if our view of our relationship with Jesus, with God through Christ, is no different from our relation with our best friend, we are not where Jesus was calling Peter to be — and I ask myself whether the fact that the third question Jesus asks, “Do you *phili*os me?” suggests maybe we are seeing that Jesus realizes that for humans, love beyond *phili*os, *agape*, tests the capacity of the human heart and mind.

Yet he asks, *Do you agape me?* Do *we agape* him? That is the first message, though not yet a message, I want us to ponder. That implicitly asks, “What does ‘more than *phili*os him’ mean?”

Part of the answer is in my second message. Notice that despite the fact that Peter never does give the answer of “You know that I *agape* you,” Jesus is persistent in giving Peter *a command*, and while those words are slightly different, I think the meaning is consistent: “Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.”

The kind of love Jesus wants shown him *even before we are able to show him agape* requires caring for his “flock.” While we might consider *feeding* or *tending* for someone because a brother asks us or a friend asks us, it is equally likely we will not, and it is equally likely that the request from a brother or friend will be no more than that, a request, and “no, I can’t” would commonly be an acceptable answer.

But Jesus does not *request* that we *feed* and *tend*; Jesus does not say, “please,” and “no, I can’t” would not be an acceptable answer to his *command*.

*Feed and tend.* That takes us back in a real way to Tevye’s wife, Golde’s, answer in “Fiddler”: love is not just about feeling but about *doing*. And that fills out a bit of the ambiguity in my introducing the first message: *To love Jesus is to follow what Jesus commands!* As I indicated, this is part of the Old Testament meaning of fearing God, holding God in awe and reverence. To *agape* Jesus calls for the obedience of a child to a parent, not the cooperation of a brother with another brother or a sister with a sister or a friend with a friend. The obedience of a child to a parent is a characteristic of the love Jesus wants us to show him; we do; we do not offer excuses for why we will not.

And that we cannot fully love Jesus without feeding his lambs and tending his sheep is clear.

That in the third question Jesus asks not if Peter *agapes* him but whether Peter *philios*’s him could be so simple as a transcribing error 1900 years ago, but then again, it could show that Jesus realizes that *agape*-ing him is not so easy a thing to achieve, that perhaps there are steps we must take to move from an ability indeed to be a friend or a fellow, from *philios*-ing others, to being able to be unselfish toward others and to be fully obedient and in awe of God. Jesus may have realized that Peter had more yet to learn before Peter understood *agape*-ing Jesus — but that he indeed would learn.

And maybe one of the ways we learn to *agape* Jesus as opposed simply to thinking we love him but comprehend that love only as “what a friend,” as *philios*-ing him, is first by seeking to obey that: “*Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.*”

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Learning to love Jesus, learning to love God through Jesus, by following Jesus' command by giving to others and learning *to love them*.

This, by the way, gets me to a point I argue with some: worshipping together is wonderful and I hope meaningful, but worshipping together is not enough to make us or anyone a church, at least not a church as in capital "C," Christ's Church. Going into a clubhouse at Caliente or attending worship on horseback is not being Church. Church involves our sharing joys and concerns with — and not just in prayer — Church involves our sharing joys and concerns with *and supporting* one another, and it involves taking Christ into the world, sometimes by literally feeding his lambs, as this congregation does with our hygiene and Thanksgiving and Christmas food programs, sending kids to camp and the like. Showing support to one another and taking Jesus into the world are ways by which we try to follow the commands Jesus gave to Peter.

If we do not undertake those activities, we are not even *phili*-ing Jesus, but as we engage in them we might begin with an attitude of *phili*-ing, but by following those commands we are on the road to *agape*-ing him, and truly learning *what love is*.

Let's not be sheepish; let us feed and tend and so doing grow in our love and understanding of our Lord and Savior.

Amen