

Do you love me?

Sermon by Marcel Rebiai

This sermon's message is summed up in the question Jesus put to Simon Peter, "Simon, do you love me?" (John 21:15). We could ask ourselves why Jesus even asked him this. After all, Jesus always knows what is in our hearts. So why this question? It's understandable when we humans ask one another such questions. We can't see into each other's hearts and thus are often unsure of each other's motives in relationships and in actions. But of God it is said, "You know me to the bottom of my soul" [translation of German version] (Ps. 139: 15b). And yet God asks us, "Do you love me?"

This is no mere rhetorical question and I am convinced that Jesus does not want to set us a trap. The question is intended neither to test nor to expose our inability and weakness. Jesus doesn't want to drive us into a corner. When he stands in front of us asking this question, we must be careful not to give a superficial answer, nor thoughtlessly to chant the correct words.

Jesus asks us this question because he is so concerned about our lives. He cares about us as lord and as a friend. We often have the impression that when Jesus turns to us he primarily wants us to do something for him. We think he's coming like the owner of the vineyard in order to check up on us and count how many baskets we filled today. Deep in our hearts we still picture God as the omnipresent school master standing behind us with his notebook registering everything we have done wrong. That is why we can so easily misinterpret God.

The question about love

The question about our love is not intended to control us. It is much more an expression of his concern. We read in 1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." Jesus' question aims preeminently to secure the condition for our benefit. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). However, not everything that happens to us automatically serves our good just because we have placed our lives in God's service; whether it's in active involvement in a congregation, in home or foreign missions, in generous financial support of Christian works and the needy, or whatever else we can catalogue. It says, "All things work for the good of those who love him."

That is why Jesus' question "Do you love me" is so existentially important. He wants everything we encounter in daily life to really work for our good, i.e. for life, for joy, for freedom, for peace, for fulfillment - because God cares for us. Jesus asks you and me about our love for him. He does this several times a day in order to give us opportunities to be aware of where our heart is taking us. Where am I actually going? What is my attitude in everyday life? Are all my acts, thoughts and words aligned with Jesus, from my heart? Do I really keep him holy? Does whatever I'm saying, doing and thinking right now honor him? Do my actions express my love for him? Where have I left the path of love, where have I lost sight of Jesus?

We can easily leave the path because, according to God's word, the nature of human beings is like that of sheep. Sheep often go astray and get lost if they aren't being led and protected by a shepherd. The prophet Isaiah says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is. 53:6). Our own paths are always godless and end in guilt. Jesus does not want us to become guilty, for that makes our lives dark and cold. Therefore he asks us daily, "Do you love me?" It is a question designed to call us back, realign us, awaken us and speak to us; it is a question designed to arrest us in our routine, thoughtlessness, superficiality and repression; a question intended to bring us out of our self-confidence, self-overestimation, or self-pity. Jesus wants to tell us, "My son, my daughter, wake up! I want to talk to you."

When our daughter Hanna was a small child she developed a simple but highly successful tactic in order to gain my full attention when she wanted to tell me something. She just took my face in her hands and turned it toward her so that I had to look at her. Only then did she share what was on her mind. This is exactly what Jesus does with his question. He wants to turn our faces to him so that we look into his eyes. Then he says, "Do you know who you belong to? Do you know where you're at home? Do you realize that you are wholly surrounded by me - at this moment and all day, wherever you go and whatever your situation? It is written, 'You cocoon me, behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me' (Ps. 139:5). Are you aware of this? Do you really believe this - right now, at this moment? Do you love me? You have so little joy, so little peace. Look into my face. In my word it is written, 'Those who look to him are radiant [German 'with joy']'" (Ps. 34:5).

Keeping our eyes on Jesus

Looking at Jesus - not just once briefly in our personal quiet time, but as a constant heart attitude - means knowing that our countenance and our heart are in his hands. If we don't look at Jesus' face over and over again during the day, we shouldn't be surprised if there is little joy in our daily lives. The path to joy is given: "Those who look to him are radiant [with joy]". Many of us go through our days like Cain with a downcast face. God said to him, "If you do what is right (i.e. if your heart is free), you can look up at me. If you do not do what is right (i.e. if your heart is bound to the things of this world), sin is crouching at your door...and desires to have you" (cp. Gen. 4:6-7). Lifting our eyes means looking into God's face because our heart is free and affiliated with him. If we look down at the ground we're not aligned with God, but with something else which drives us, pushes us down and imprisons us.

"Do you love me?" If we let Jesus repeat this question every day, it will keep renewing the alignment of our eyes, our path and our heart attitude with God. It will illuminate our relationship to our own selves, to our brothers and sisters, to the world and to everything we do. Jesus' question affects the source, goal and centre of our being. It reminds us of Col. 3:23-24, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward."

Doing everything for Jesus means always keeping our eyes on him. In Psalm 18 we see a person who from his whole heart kept God before him and kept looking in his face. It is interesting that the Psalm begins with the words, "I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies." The psalmist can hardly stop describing everything God is to him. There is a powerful torrent of joy, enthusiasm, and trust pouring from his heart because he is looking in God's face. "I love you, O Lord, my strength!"

David, the man after God's heart

We too readily conclude that it was easy for David to commune thus. After all, he was one of God's favourites, who had a more straightforward life than others. But we, on the other hand - the rank and file who must cook with ordinary water - have little reason or opportunity for such exuberance and passion. We are pressured by so many fears and storms in life that we have our hands full with the daily battle for spiritual survival. We're left with little room for fervency and effervescence. David had it easy; God was close to him.

And that is true. God was close to David, very close. But this does not alter the fact that in the same Psalm David cries out, "The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me. The cords of the grave coiled around me; the snares of death confronted me" (v. 4-5).

David was no stranger to temptations, suffering and the impression that God was distant. On the contrary, the depth and quality of his faith were formed in just such times of suffering in the desert and darkness. We see this in many of his Psalms. In Psalm 13 David cries to God, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" (v.1-2).

David, chosen by God to be king of Israel one day, had first to spend his life as a refugee and servant of the godless, despised Philistines in order to survive (1 Sam. 27). David would have had many significant reasons to doubt both his calling and God's presence and care. But we see his greatness precisely when in the midst of his problems he could say, "In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears" (Ps. 18:6).

Instead of going from God's presence in times of doubts and accusations, David flung himself onto his God. He knew that God was for him, no matter what his present situation was like – as another psalmist put it: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps.73:25-26).

Throwing ourselves on God

David understood that the living God of Israel was the sole source of hope, help, comfort, peace and joy. Therefore with the passion of despair he threw his whole existence on God; storms, quakes and darkness could no longer shake him off. He knew that all paths which do not lead to God's heart would end in despair; that all cries not directed to his God's ear would echo in hollowness; that all looks not directed to his God would be lost in darkness.

That is why - after he had cried out to his God in need and pain, holding fast to him - he could confidently confess, "He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me" (Ps. 18:19). David's outstanding characteristic was his unreserved exposure to God's love. He made that love the foundation of his life, the core of his identity, the source of his security and freedom, the place of his peace, the power of his actions.

The awareness of being loved by God was so important and ever-present for David that nothing could darken God's countenance for him. Nothing could rob him of the faith that God is good and repays those who seek him. "My cry will come before him, for he loves me!" This is the faith which makes us into men and women after God's heart: God is love and I am created for him...God is absolutely good and my life is in his hands in every situation whatever the circumstances... Nothing and no one can tear me out of God's hands - not even sin...

David actually fell into very great sin. He committed adultery and murder. How could a person with such guilt still be called "a man after God's heart"? David's secret was neither his moral fortitude nor his gifts, but his heart attitude. When Nathan the prophet confronted him with his offence, King David did not consider himself too good to humble himself before God and the people, and to accept the consequences without complaint. His guilt and repentance became so well-known that today every child can learn about it. For David there was no alternative. He knew not only that God is greater than all guilt, but also that there is no other hope for anyone than to go to God with the guilt, no matter how grave the offence.

As the psalmist said (130:3), "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand?" David never lost his faith in God's goodness, love and holiness even in the despair caused by his sin. His repentance was thus a deep brokenness in the eyes of the whole world.

The depth of brokenness and repentance in a person's life corresponds with the depth of the restoration and the authority which come out of it. The fact that we men and women of God can fall into sin is really not surprising, for sin lurks outside our door daily. It entices and

tempts us in our weak moments. If we do not fall it is only because of our lord's mercy. But our heart's quality is truly revealed only by the depth of our brokenness, by the genuineness and fruits of our repentance and by the depth of our disgust over the sin we tasted. That is why David was still called "a man after God's heart" even after his great sin. Or then all the more!

Peter as well. Peter wept bitterly over his betrayal of Jesus and didn't hide his guilt from anyone. He found his way back to the heart of his Lord - who restored him, as a man after his own heart, as leader of the apostles. Whoever has truly aligned his heart with his God won't be driven away even through sin and weakness. And God in his faithfulness will transform even guilt and weakness into the best for the person who clings to him and does not doubt his love.

Those who do not really know God's love in his son Jesus nor truly love him in return, can easily be broken when guilt, weakness and need are suddenly poured over them in a deluge. For the depths of their hearts are not directed to God but to circumstances and to themselves. They know neither hope nor help, just as Judas hanged himself after his betrayal of Jesus. He was not aligned with Jesus and had not really known Jesus' heart. Therefore, in his need and guilt, he couldn't find the way to Jesus' heart in order to receive forgiveness. Judas hanged himself. Others turn away from God because they persuade themselves, "Now it's over. No one can help me any more."

Neither could King Saul find the way back to God's heart because he did not look into God's countenance. Saul was primarily concerned with attaining his military goals; he strove to save his authority and to save face. Of course he wanted to serve God and the people with these goals, but on his conditions and with his methods. Because his eyes and heart were directed to himself he broke down under pressure and committed suicide. He actually thought that all would be lost if his people and his soldiers deserted him. He wasn't obedient to God because he didn't really count on him. So God was unable to use Saul's difficult situation for his best.

How God wishes we were so aligned with him that nothing could alarm or trouble us any more; he wants us to know that everything we encounter must serve for our best. Let us have Jesus remind, reorient us and ask us daily, "Do you love me? Are you looking into my face? Do you believe that I love you? Do you allow my word to mould you? Are you certain that your complaints reach my ears? Do you believe I hear you?"

Let us expose ourselves to God's message for our lives. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jer. 29:11). God's thoughts must spread out in our hearts and become a protection which makes our hearts indestructible. They are indestructible because they are so secure in God's love, goodness and mercy that evil, fear and darkness can no longer reach them.

Daily practice

The daily practice of this trustful gazing into his countenance is not a matter of five minutes' quiet time per day. It's is not a duty but a continuing conversation. It's a dialogue between two loving hearts who have much to say to each other every day. Jesus wants to direct our face toward himself so that it can radiate joy. This is not a question of a method but of our determination. Do we give credence to God's thoughts about us? Can we say from our hearts, "I want him to be in everything I do because he is my love and the centre of my being. I want to know him more deeply every day and sacrifice everything for his sake"?

If I really love I will happily read my beloved's letters over and over again. I have letters from my wife which she wrote me more than 26 years ago and I still enjoy reading them, even though what she wrote is - thank God for it - the same as she writes today. But I

now understand it more deeply because our love has grown; it has become part of our lives and has stood the test. If we really love Jesus we will go to him over and over again, saying, "Lord, please tell me again how you see me. And I, too, will tell you over and over again that I love you."

Friends, read the letter of your beloved, read God's word! Memorize it! See to it that his word accompanies you, surrounds you, pursues you. May his word dwell in us in such a way that our hearts - if we are old or ill and have no more energy to read it actively - become springs from which God's words flow like a living, healing stream. There will be situations in our lives when the only things we can fall back on will be what is engraved on our hearts, as on a CD.

Nothing is more lovely than listening to old people who love Jesus and effortlessly quote God's word from their hearts. This is like distributing precious treasures from a treasure box. Because these people exposed themselves to God's message, the mystery could unfold in their hearts: The mystery is that your face will be radiant with joy because all things work for the good of those who love him.

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