“Do you love me?” is the companion sermon to last week’s sermon of Peter’s three-fold betrayal of His Master and friend, Jesus. Scholars have often noted that the three-fold denial is matched by a three-fold expression of love by Jesus. But we have to listen to the right “voice” of Jesus in this passage in order to understand the passage. Was Jesus being obnoxious and condemning to His friend Peter? Did the fact that He repeated the question to Peter THREE TIMES suggest He was rebuking His friend for Peter’s earlier denial? Or was it something else. Personally, I think we need to hear Jesus speaking the question, “Do you love me?” (John 21: 16) in the kindest and gentlest way; Jesus is expressing His love for Peter; it is without edge or reproof.

It was not like what happened to me many years ago. When I was in law school I clerked my first summer for Mr. I.C. Bloom here in Washington. When I would do something stupid or when my research was less than stellar, Mr. Bloom would call me into his office and point to sign in one of his side bookcases and say, “Stu, do you see that sign?” I was expected to turn my head and look at the sign and then would say, “Yes, Mr. Bloom.” Then he would say, “And what does that sign say, Stu?” And I was expected to say, “Think, Mr. Bloom. The sign says, Think.” And then he would say, “And what didn’t you do on the so-and-so case, Stu?” “Think, Mr. Bloom; I didn’t think.” I suspect I wasn’t the first law clerk who didn’t think. Now after about the fourth or fifth time of being called into Mr. Bloom’s office and him pointing at the sign on his bookcase I pretty much had the sign memorized. But I still had to look at the bookcase, and respond to Mr. Bloom that I didn’t think. I THINK that there was not a great likelihood that one day the law firm would become: “Bloom, Bloom, Rosenberg, Bloom and Broberg!”

So is that the way Jesus was treating Peter? I don’t think so. This was beautifully unpacked for us by Dr. Jim Platt in our adult ed class here at the church this past Tuesday. The class is entitled, “Lost in Translation” and it basically is making the point that if we don’t understand the underlying Greek language of this passage that we cannot understand what is really going on in this set of scripture from the very end of the Gospel of John.

So let me set the stage in this way. Less than a week before Peter has betrayed His friend and Master, Jesus. Three times in the High Priest’s courtyard he has denied even knowing the man who was about to go to the cross for him. (John 18: 15-24) The third time he vehemently denies knowing Jesus, invokes a curse, and shouts out, “I do not know the man!” And, of course, being the Son of God, Jesus knows exactly what Peter, who had so shortly before professed would never desert him, had said. Jesus knows Peter has betrayed Him; we hide nothing from the Son of God. For Peter, Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is both incredibly exciting and yet also incredibly frightening. For the man he has betrayed is who He claimed to be—the only begotten Son of the One, True and Living God. So when Peter sees Jesus he is both exhilarated and frightened. How will Jesus respond to him? What will Jesus say? Will Jesus still love me?

The context of this passage is that Jesus has just gone to the cross and been raised from the dead to forgive Peter. Indeed, to forgive all who have ever wavered in their faith, ever pretended not to be a Christian, ever run away when they should have stood and fought, ever denied Jesus, ever betrayed the Master. The amazing forgiveness of Jesus is that He forgives even His best friend who denied Him. Jesus doesn’t kick Peter to the curb; Jesus speaks of love to His friend. What a man! What a Savior! What a friend we have in Jesus! Thank you, we praise You, Lord! All the large and small betrayals in life are forgiven by the One who doesn’t have to forgive but does simply because He loves us.
So Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” (John 21: 15) and He uses the Greek form of the word “love” agapao (Thank you, Dr. Platt!) meaning the divine, never-ending, unconditional, never-wavering, as strong on the day of Peter’s denial as on Peter’s confession “You are the Christ, the Son of God!” kind of love. And Peter responds: “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” (v.15) Except Peter uses the Greek form of the word “love” phileo (Thank you, Dr. Platt) meaning friendship, brotherly love and affection, City of brotherly love kind of love. Jesus asks the question with agapao DIVINE LOVE; but Peter answers with phileo FRIENDSHIP Kind of love. Having boldly boasted time and time again that He would never betray Jesus now Peter is more cautious; now Peter says, I love You, Lord, but I can’t really claim that I have a divine love for You. You have a divine love for me. Your love that took You to the cross is agapao, divine love. Your love that took You to the grave is agapao, divine love. Your love that had You rise from the dead in the power of the resurrection is agapao, divine love. But my love, Jesus, is not that; I know that You know that I betrayed You; I know that You know I denied You. So Jesus, today when You ask me I can’t really say that I love You with the same love that brought You to the cross and died for me. You ask in agapao love, but the best I can do today is answer with phileo love… After I kicked you to the curb in the High Priest’s courtyard You, Jesus, haven’t done the same for me. So I am humbled and ashamed but I cannot yet say that I love You the same way that You love me.

Now it is interesting that the third time Jesus asks the question, Jesus asks “Do you love me?” (v. 17) Jesus has now changed the Greek word He used from agapao to phileo, from divine love to friendship love. (Thank you, Dr. Platt!) Jesus asks: “Do you love me like a friend, Peter?” To this Peter responds: “Lord you know everything (you know I denied you and you know I betrayed you and you know that I am filled with bluster and boasting and when the going got tough this pretend tough guy got going) you know that I love you.” (v. 17) Peter also uses the word phileo. Jesus asks in friendship and Peter responds with friendship. Jesus, out of His divine love, meets and embraces His fallen friend Peter exactly where he is; Jesus embraces Peter in his humiliation. What manner of man is this? What kind of divine love is this that has the power to transform a man like Peter and through him, our world????

I end with a flight of fancy. Tradition has it that when persecution in Rome intensifies and Peter as leader of the church in Rome is apprehended he, of course, is allowed the opportunity to recant his belief in Jesus, and if he once again denies his friend he will be released and not have to endure the excruciating pain and humiliation of the horrible death of the cross. This time, having been prepared for his martyrdom by his Master, he does not deny his faith nor his love for Jesus. This time he declares: I am a Christian. Go ahead; nail me to the cross. So as Peter is about to be crucified, he requests to be crucified upside down, as an even worse death than regular crucifixion. Because he believes he is not worthy to be crucified the same way Jesus was crucified. All of this is tradition, but now my flight of fancy. And as Peter is hanging there in excruciating pain, he looks up and he declares to the heavens. “Yes, Lord Jesus, NOW You know I love You, agapao love, as You have loved me.” O disciple, Jesus’ love has the peculiar power to transform a denier into an Apostle of particular power and effectiveness. Out of our betrayals come Jesus’ forgiveness, love and power. Do I love you, Jesus? I do. Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!