

5-3-09

Do you love me?

John 21:15-19

The Swine flu outbreak that has alarmed us last week is still a main issue in the news. We are facing another danger and may be experiencing some anxiety over Swine Flu, as well as the possibility of pandemics in our world in general. The Swine Flu has been reported in 18 States in the United States.

A security aide helping with arrangements during President Barack Obama's recent trip to Mexico became ill with flu-like symptoms, the White House says. Three members of his family later contracted probable Swine Flu. The Swine Flu is not only in issue in Mexico, but also of concern in the United States, as well as globally.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are recommending the following actions to help control the spread of Swine Flu: (1) First, wash hands frequently with soap and water for 15 to 20 seconds-especially after coughing, sneezing or touching surfaces that may have the virus on it. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers may also be used. (2) Second, try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth with your hands to prevent the spread of germs. (3) Third, stay home from work, school or other public places if you are ill. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you sneeze or cough and discard the tissue in the trash. Then wash your hands with soap and water or sanitizer.

Ultimately, they are recommending that we try to avoid contact with people who are ill through "social distancing," or limiting unnecessary physical contact with other individuals.

About 409 B.C., the Carthaginian army invaded the Syracuse in Sicily. The battle between the Carthaginian and Syracuse army was fierce. But, once influenza spread in the battlefield, the victims to this epidemic mounted up on both sides in such great numbers that they couldn't continue the battle. The Carthaginian army had to withdraw from the Syracuse.

Eight years later, in 398 B.C., the newly organized young Carthaginian army invaded Syracuse once again, and the Syracuse were almost collapsed by the young Carthaginian army. However, again there occurred an outbreak of influenza in the battle field. Ironically, influenza killed most of the young Carthaginian soldiers, while among the old Syracuse soldiers, only a few were found dead because of the disease. The Carthaginian soldiers had to withdraw once again, and never again came back. The victory was given to the Syracuse by the influenza.

There is a reason why most of the older Syracuse soldiers survived the epidemic, while the young Carthaginian soldiers died. Because the old Syracuse soldiers were those who had been exposed to the influenza during the former battle, and thus were immunized,

they were stronger than the young soldiers on the battlefield of influenza. One's immune system is more important in keeping good health than anything else!

There is a more important attitude we might learn through the Swine Flu than the lesson of simply avoiding contact with people who are ill—that is, to love and to care for people.

In 1450, the plague which invaded England had killed one third of the population. But, the only survivors were Christian monks who helped and cared for those who became ill due to the plague, what was then called the “Black Death”. Those monks were sickened by the plague also, but their love for others exposed them often to the plague, which in turn helped develop in some of them immunity to the plague.

Evidently, the Greek philosopher Plato, who lived twenty-three centuries ago, believed this, for he wrote: “The greatest mistake that physicians make is that they attempt to cure the body without attempting to cure the mind; yet the body and the mind are one and should not be treated separately.”

Do you know what the strongest immune system in a human's mental life is? It is love. Love is a powerful immune system in the mental life. Some psychologists suggest that with human actions of loving activity, a healing chemical response actually occurs within the human body.

Perfect love is the goal of the Christian life. And the very desire to love and be loved is part of human nature. It is part of the image of God. Loving is natural; it is unnatural not to love. Of course, most human beings fail to love or love badly a lot of the time.

This is because we are dominated by the fear of death and of our own physical and emotional vulnerability, and by our ways of compensating for this fear. We need power over other people. We are afraid of the future. We suffer from envy, resentments, depression, hyperactivity, and boredom.

The story in today's scripture reading, John 21:15-19, occurred a few days after the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Our Lord Jesus had appeared to the people for forty days after His resurrection. Prior to His crucifixion, Jesus had told His disciples that after He was risen, He would go before them into Galilee. Thus, He showed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias.

There were seven of the disciples together. Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the two sons of Zebedee and two other of his disciples. In spite of the fact that these men had seen and talked with their risen Lord on two different occasions, they were still as sheep without a shepherd. It was only natural for them to think in terms of their previous occupations.

Peter, James, and John had been fishermen by trade. So Peter said, “I go for fishing.” He found ready acceptance of his proposal by the other six, who said, “We will go too.” The

disciples seemed to have continued their ordinary work, waiting calmly for the sign which should determine their future.

They entered into a ship immediately and awaited the night, the favorable time for fishing. But that night they caught nothing. When the morning was now come, the risen Jesus stood on the shore. But the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Maybe due to the distance from the shore, the dim light of dawn, or a mist on the lake, the disciples couldn't recognize Jesus standing at the shore.

Jesus initiated the conversation with a question, "Boys, you have not had any catch, have you?" They answered him, "No." Then Jesus gave them specific instructions, "Cast the net on the right side of the ship, and you shall find." They cast and now they were not able to draw it in for the multitude of fish! Then John recalled his previous experience with Jesus who instructed them in the same way, and recognized him and said, "It is the Lord!"

None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew that it was the risen Lord. Jesus already prepared breakfast for them on the shore. He took bread and gave it to them, and fish likewise. This was the third time that Jesus had shown himself to his disciples after He was risen from the dead.

As soon as breakfast was over, Jesus came to the second major concern of the morning. He addressed himself to Peter. Simon, son of Jonas, Do you love me more than these? Peter answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Then, Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time He said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said again, "Feed my sheep." Love one another is the Lord's commandment to us. And, "Love your Lord God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself" is the great commandment of Lord. Life without love is really worthless.

Love is an unavoidable issue for us. It is not a selective, but a mandatory issue. Love will last forever. "These three things continue forever: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love."

"Do you love me?" is a serious and significant question between two persons. There is expectation as well as commitment when this question is being asked. Through these questions and answers, we may find the true meaning of Love in Christian life. In this, Jesus' question, we can find three things in terms of true love.

First, true love should be responsive. "Do you love me?" is a question that occurs between lovers expecting a response. True love, therefore, should be mutual love. In the

movie, Fever Pitch, Ben Wrightman is crazy about the Boston Red Sox baseball team. He rarely misses a game during the spring and summer months. One winter, Ben falls in love with a young woman named Lindsey and wins her heart. Then, spring rolls around, and she finds out that he's a different person during baseball season. He has no time for her unless she goes to the games with him.

When Lindsey ends her relationship with Ben because of his fanaticism, he talks with a young friend, who says, "You love the Sox. But tell me, have they ever loved you back?" Those words cause Ben to analyze his priorities and to give more time to the woman he loves, who loves him back.

We pour our lives into hobbies, pleasures, activities, works – many good things. But two things should always be thought about when making our choices. When it seems our life is getting out of balance, the question, "Has that hobby or activity or thing ever loved me back?" may help to keep us in check. Loving God and loving people are what really count.

Second, the true love of Jesus is better than love of any other. True love should be one. "Do you love more than these?" Jesus asked Peter. In Jesus' question we can interpret three possibilities. (1) Do you love me more than you love these disciples? (2) Do you love me more than you love boats, nets and catching fish? (3) Do you love me more than these disciples love me?

Jesus wants better love than any other love. God wants us to love God exclusively. "You shall have no other gods before me." "You shall not bow down to idols or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God."

You should love your wife exclusively. Don't even think about other women instead of your wife. You should love your husband exclusively. Don't think about other men. That is the meaning of true love. We cannot love God and the world equally. We cannot put their worth equally.

Thirdly, true love is responsible love. God loves us unconditionally but God wants you to give something back. This is God's purpose for your life, and it is called your "ministry," or service. Loving Jesus is taking responsibility for the assignment, given to us by Jesus: "If you love me then feed my sheep." Pure love is the only adequate basis for the service of "feed my sheep."

Those who are commissioned have a God-given command to be pastors of the flock, which is primarily feeding, giving watchful care to the sheep. We are all called to the ministry of God. The church is the place to serve together according to the Lord's assignment.

There is nothing in the world more powerful than love. Love is our assignment and the answer of the question of life. Love is the will of God for us. Love is the single most authentic sign of discipleship. Love is the hope of the world.

Emptiness, meaninglessness, and despair in our soul are the results of a lack of true love in our heart.