

“He asks, ‘Do you love me?’”
John 21:1-11
The third Sunday of Easter – April 22, 2007
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
The Reverend Michael J Magee

Introduction: Jesus asks, “Do you love me?”

Debbie and I saw the musical, *Fiddler On The Roof*, a few years ago. After 25 years of marriage, Tevyev comes into the house and asks his wife, "Golda, do you love me?" Golda sighs as she looks at him and says, "Do I love you? For 25 years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cows. After 25 years, why talk of love right now?" Tevyev answers by saying, "Golda, the first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was scared, I was shy, I was nervous." "So was I," said Golda. "But my father and my mother said we'd learn to love each other, and now I'm asking, "Golda, do you love me?" "Do I love him?" Golda sighs. "For 25 years I've lived with him, fought with him, 25 years my bed is his! If that's not love, what is?" "Then you love me?" Tevyev asks. "I suppose I do!" she says. "And I suppose I love you too!" he says. The question, "Do you love me?" is the same one Jesus is asking Peter in the closing scene of the Good News according to John. Focusing on this question puts into perspective this week's headlines.

Scene 1 – Bad things happen – The disciples fish all night and catch nothing

Jesus dies, and the world teeters on its edge. So the disciple / fisherman decide to do something familiar. Something that will put the world back into balance. They get into the fishing boat. But not just any boat. Peter's boat. The same small boat on the Lake of Galilee that appears in all the boat and fishing stories in the Gospels. They fish all night

with the same boat, the same net, the same technique, the same people, but they catch nothing. Before he died, Jesus asked them to be fishers of people, and they can't even catch fish. Their leader has died, and they are ashamed, they are bitter, and they fear their movement will die with him. Things look pretty dark. Can you see the shame they have because they catch no fish? Can you see in Peter's slumped shoulders his shame for denying Jesus three times? Can you taste the bitterness they have that the Lake of Galilee gives up no fish? Can you taste their bitterness toward the Roman bureaucracy for crucifying their leader and see their pinched faces? Can you smell their fear for the future of their movement? Smell their fear of failure? Aren't these also the three things which blind us to the love that God and our neighbors have for us? Shame, bitterness, and fear.

Monday morning in Blacksburg, Virginia, 32 students and staff at Virginia Tech are killed in the largest single shooting in modern American history. The shooter, an angry and disturbed young man, then kills himself. You may say, "But that is in another state, and impacts me little" – Not so quick.

How does this impact us? Of what has the world been robbed? I do not know the particulars of all the students. So let's hypothesize. Suppose an agricultural student died on Monday, who if he lived, was to develop a new strand of wheat or potato that would yield more production per acre, eventually solving world hunger. After 4/16, he is NOW GONE! Perhaps a student was killed who was to be the future president of Bagdad University, and teach peace and tolerance, NOW GONE! Perhaps one of the students killed was to take a sewing needle and adapt it so that a bit of small pox vaccine could be easily administered, permanently eradicating this disease, NOW GONE!.

But these are not potential individual accomplishments with world-wide impact. They have already taken place. And let me emphasize they were achieved by alumni of Virginia Tech. So what about the future; what influences both subtle and great have been erased by this week's massacre? We drop our rock in the pond and the ripples move throughout history. But tragedies happen and it's like the pebble has been snatched out of the water and the ripples have to retreat back, the influence gone. Does the death of these 32 impact you, even though they were several states away? You better believe it!

And this says nothing of the personal anguish of those who knew these young students. We can talk about their professional lives cut short, but we cannot begin to calculate the emotional and spiritual consequences.

In the Virginia Tech memorial service Tuesday evening, Professor and poet Nikki Giovanni said:

“We are sad today, and we will be sad for quite a while. We do not understand this tragedy. We know we did nothing to deserve it. But neither does a child in Africa dying of AIDS. Neither does the Mexican child who cannot find clean water. No one deserves a tragedy.”

So what do we say and do when bad things happen, and God seems so far away? Do we fix the blame on culture, on nature, or God's character? On gun laws, on mental illness, or on God's absence?

Scene 2 – Forgiveness cures blame – Jesus forgives Peter and gives him space to forgive himself

Events like 9/11, Katrina, and now Virginia Tech raise fundamental questions. Why is there so much tragedy in the world? Why do innocent people suffer? Does the blame lie in chaotic nature or corrupt culture? Then we ask the *ultimate* question: Where was God? Where was God on September 11, 2001, when confused terrorists snuffed out the lives of 3000 in the World Trade Center? Where was God on December 26, 2004 when the tsunami washed 280,000 lives away? Where was God that morning of August 29, 2005 when Katrina blew the Gulf Coast away? Where was God on Monday morning, April 16, 2007, when a mentally disturbed man blew 33 lives away, including his own?

Eight years ago this past Friday, April 20 1999, two minors killed 12 students and a teacher at Columbine HS before killing each other. The National Rifle Association chose Charlton Heston to be their national spokesperson. Pretty clever merchandising! Moses reading public announcements! Hear the clever script Charlton Heston read about Columbine. "Guns don't kill people, children do!" To this day, I do not know if that was a joke that Heston was playing on the NRA, or if that was the sincere but misguided feelings of an executive of the NRA. We always want to blame someone else for our problems. We need a scape goat.

Where is the God of love when terrible tragedies befall us? Where was God this week? I can say with confidence where God was NOT! God was NOT controlling the mind of Cho Seung Hui as he walked to school that day.

Before I became a pastor, I had a friend who was not performing his job. He satisfied all 11 diagnostic criteria in the DSM-IV for severe clinical depression. I was neither his physician nor his counselor, just his friend. But as an oncologist, I diagnose

and successfully treat clinical depression in my office every day. I know what depression looks like. My friend had clinical depression. I took him out to eat lunch and confronted him with my diagnosis. This was my third time to confront him with his depression. I told him how he was not performing his job. I suggested he take a 6 month sabbatical, during which he get both psychological counseling and career counseling. Once again, he did not hear me. He told me he was not depressed, but even if he was, he asked how was it affecting his job? I had just told him. He did not hear me. But you cannot diagnose your own mental illness. It requires a level of objectivity that you cannot achieve.

And because of our culture, even well educated people like my friend think mental illness is at best a character flaw, and at worst demon possession. Instead of the chemical imbalance that medical science shows it to be. He believes to this day that my confronting him with his depression was nothing other than character assassination. How sad!

Where is God when bad things happen in nature? Did God will or encourage tragedy? Or does God go on a holiday? What about cancer? The same sequences of DNA responsible for division of that smallest unit of life, the cell, are also responsible for cancer. If we eliminate these sequences of DNA, these oncogenes, we eliminate life as we know it because cells must divide for life to continue. What about tsunamis? Our continents sit on huge rocks which geologists call tectonic plates. If we eliminate the shifting of tectonic plates, there will be no more earthquakes and no more tsunamis, but the internal pressure of the earth will have no release, and our world would explode into space. What appears to us to be the chaos of nature is actually ordered. I do not fully

understand the biochemistry of schizophrenia. But I know that it is an inherited abnormal distribution of dopamine and serotonin in the brain. If we eliminated these neurotransmitters, we would eliminate schizophrenia, but we would also eliminate our ability to think. We COULD blame the Virginia Tech massacre on a sick mind. But when bad things happen as a result of what appears to us to be the chaos of nature, we cannot blame them on God.

Bad things also happen as a result of humankind's free will. We can blame the VA Tech massacre on our culture's violence or current gun laws. Or we can blame it on current security measures. Free will at the voting booth, not God, created our culture's violence, current gun laws, and current security measures. We cannot the blame outcomes of our poor choices on God.

While this tragedy can be explained by our culture's tolerance of guns and violence, by the fact that the visible signs of Cho Seung Hui's mental illness could have been taken more seriously, or by any number of things, there is no simple or single explanation.

Yes, there is plenty of blame to go around without blaming God. Blame attached to what appears to be the chaos of nature. And blame attached to our own free will. But Jesus reaches out to his disciples. Peter denies Jesus three times. So Jesus asks him three times if he loves him. Jesus forgives Peter. The parents of Cho Seung Hui have publicly asked for forgiveness. If you are a parent of one of the VA Tech students who was gunned down on Monday, would you forgive? Some of us are surprised to learn that the New Testament was originally written in Greek 2000 years ago, not in the King James

English. So let us look at the Greek word translated “to forgive.” The Greek word αφετημι has two meanings, to forgive and to let go. The idea is that forgiving is letting go. Letting go of the hot coal of bitterness. The hot coal of bitterness that will burn your hand if you do not let it go. Jesus forgives Peter. And Jesus forgives us. In response, we stop looking for someone to blame. We forgive the young man with mental illness. And we stand in solidarity with those who grieve.

This is not a time to seek easy answers by assigning blame. It is instead a time to pray, mourn, and reflect. The disciples are distraught because their leader has died, and their inability to catch fish is for them a metaphor that they are doomed to failure. They cannot do this themselves. The massacre at Virginia Tech reminds us there is plenty of tragedy in the world. But there is also hope.

Scene 3 – God gives us hope – Jesus says, cast your nets on the other side, and come dine with me!

When the sun came up behind them, Jesus was standing on the beach in front of them. He said, “Good morning! Did you catch anything for breakfast?” When they answered, “No,” he said, “Throw the net off the right side of the boat and see what happens.” When they did as suggested, there were so many fish in their net they were not strong enough to pull it in. When they got out of the boat, they saw a fire laid, with fish and bread cooking on it. Jesus said, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” He said, “Breakfast is ready.” With Jesus’ help, the disciples do catch fish. And then Jesus invites them to a picnic breakfast on the beach. A banquet with bread and fish. A foretaste of the heavenly banquet. Disappointment is turned into a feast.

So, where is God? I'll tell you where God was THIS week. God was there in the final moments of the shooting as students called on cell phones to say, "Mom, I'm OK." God was there in the hands of the paramedics. God was there behind police badges. God was there in the faculty of the school, and the nurses. God is near the heart of all who in the face of tragedy love their neighbor and turn to God.

Where is God? Let me answer that question again, this time with the motto of Virginia Tech. "That I May Serve." Professor Liviu Librescu, a survivor of the Holocaust, is a living example of that motto. He stood in the doorway and did not let a murderer go in...had his students jump out the second story window and told them, "just keep on going; I'll hold him back." He stood in the space between the gunman and the students, the bullets entering his body, and he still did not let the gunman go in.

His students made it out alive. He did not. It is ironic that sixty years later a survivor of the Holocaust died protecting US citizens from the tyranny of a confused mind. "That I may serve." Professor Librescu fulfilled his University's highest goal.

Where is God? .Let me answer that question yet again. Even after tragedies, the world still turns. People near us are starving. I saw God this week when folks from our church, Linda, Gladys, Joan, Mary and Powell fed God's sheep at Downtown Presbyterian's soup kitchen last Wednesday. I see God when Dr Leah Patton from our congregation goes to her TN care clinic next to Baptist Hospital, and when Dr Frank Freemon from our congregation goes to the Siloam Clinic on Fridays. I see God when Leah's husband, Doak, attorney at law, defends indigent Hispanics in court. I see God when the Presbytery of Middle TN goes to Longbeach Mississippi to help Katrina

victims rebuild their homes. We will see God when our Presbytery goes to Guatemala this summer with the Spanish Bibles Frank procured for us. I see God in the adults who teach the children in Bible Study today after worship. In today's first scripture reading, Paul's meeting with Jesus on the outskirts of Damascus totally changes his life. He is never the same afterwards. He is a marked man. I submit that those who, like the members of our congregation, feed and tend God's sheep, that they themselves will never be the same. For in the face of God's sheep they, like Paul, will see Jesus. And they will never be the same.

Conclusion

Charlton Heston, hot coals, and letting go. Fiddler on the Roof, and Professor Librescu. Jesus asks Peter, and then he asks each of us, "Do you love me?"

In Blacksburg, Brentwood, Nashville, and in Guatemala, whenever and wherever morning guilds the skies, you know it is a new day. *Every* day is a new day. On the beach, over a simple breakfast of fish and bread, Jesus asks you, "Do you love me?" I think Jesus does not want you and me to sit around waiting for a miracle. I think Jesus wants you and me to be the miracle. Again Jesus asks you, "Do you love me?" I think he wants more than lip service. He wants you to do something. He is waiting for your answer.

Glory be to God. Alleluia and Amen.