

05.01.22 John 21: 1 -19

I believe I was in high school taking a class in Comparative Religion when I read Victor Frankl's short book, "Man's Search for Meaning", written in 1946. Frankl was an Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, philosopher, writer, and holocaust survivor. Both of his parents died in the camps, as did his wife, Tilly. Frankl himself spent years in the camps, including Auchwitz, where 1,000,000 Jews were murdered. After the war, as he wrote about his experiences, he recalled this incident:

We stumbled on in the darkness. . . . The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. . . . Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us." That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. . . . my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. . . . I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.

Frankl spent his life advocating for the importance of meaning as a salve against suffering and the secret to [happiness](#). Meaning brought him through the Holocaust and formed the basis for his entire approach to life.

In other words, Frankl believes that meaning cannot be pursued as a goal in itself. It must ensue as a side-effect of pursuing other [goals](#). If what you really want is to find meaning, he instructs, "you have to let it happen by not caring about it." Instead, he suggests embracing activities that connect you with something greater. This may involve connecting yourself with the pursuit of knowledge by working toward a college degree, committing yourself to the care of others through volunteer work, dedicating yourself to the expression of love through raising a family, or any number of other endeavors.

Allow me to take you back to another experience when I was maybe 16 years old, attending a youth rally. I was already a veteran of such rallies and revivals, but I went along with the church youth group that night to get out of the house and away from my parents who were on this earth to make my life miserable, so I thought, and to pursue a young lady in the youth group who was on this earth to make my life wonderful, or so I thought.

At the end of the particularly long sermon we were to put our heads down and pray while the preacher invited us to raise our hand and commit ourselves to Jesus. This was a type of Presbyterian altar call, and I took it seriously. He prayed "And now, everyone who feels far from God this night, raise your hand high right now and tell God how . . . And I did. I raised my hand, but not in response to the preacher's prayer, although his prayer was a factor in the moment. I raised my hand in response to a deeper question that would not let me be.

Like Peter beside the Sea of Tiberias, I heard the question asked again and again, "Do you love me?" until in desperation, or surrender, I said, Yes, Lord, you now that I love you. I raised my hand that night not to show how sorry I was for my sins, real or imagined. I was giving up or giving in to the relentless love of Christ who kept coming at me despite all those real and imaginary sins that stained my conscience.

"Do you love me?" is the fundamental question of our faith. I know that you, too, have heard this question at some time in your life. I know that not because I am so well acquainted with each of you sitting here, or sitting at home, but because I know a little something of the nature of God. It is the loving nature of God, who raised Jesus from the dead so that this Jesus meets us today and asks, "Do you love me?"

Yes Lord, you know that I love you. You know everything - my weakness when the way is hard, my cowardice when facing conflict, my desire to save my own skin - what else might Peter answered Jesus because despite everything - his betrayal, his anger, his stubbornness, his character flaws and fear, Peter does love Jesus.

I wouldn't call Peter's encounter with the Risen Lord a conversion experience, It is more like a time of affirmation, and discovery of meaning. Each time Peter replied, "Yes Lord," Jesus said, "Feed my lambs, my sheep, tend my flock." To love Jesus is to serve Jesus, and it is a distinguishing characteristic of being Presbyterian that to love Jesus invites us to assume responsibility for the sheep, the flock, the lambs. Have you heard the question this morning, Do you love me? Have you heard it in this sermon, in the music, will you hear them when we pray, as the words whispered in your heart by Someone who knows all there is to know about you and loves all the more and wants you to follow him. Now, I won't ask you to bow your heads and raise your hand while we pray. But know that I am your pastor ready to listen to you as you consider the implication of saying in reply to Jesus, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. A quiet word will be enough for me to follow up with you later in the week.

I will ask this of you, however: that you approach the congregation assessment coming soon with your "Yes Lord, you know I love you." There may be as many different ways to feed the sheep and tend the flock as there are people in the pews and those watching at home. Your individual response to Jesus could be unique to who you are. You may wonder why the Presbytery requires this step in searching for a pastor - it is so that you as a church can come together with all of our uniquely individual ways to love Jesus, and maximize Christian witness. Your response as a congregation can be focused in 1, 2 3, or more areas, which is what the assessment is designed to discover. Jesus asks you as a church, "Do you love me? Then take care of my lambs, my flock." The assessment process begins soon. In all this , go about your work with the question and your answer before you: "Do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Feed my sheep, my lambs, my flock."