

Do You Love Me?

My name is Haven. I was raised a Christian, asked Jesus into my heart when I was four and insisted that I was ready to be baptized when I was nine. But as a young adult I took something like a ten year fishing trip: exploring other faith traditions, seeking healing for some emotional wounds and trying to find my way in the world.

Something I noticed and appreciated in the gospel story is that when Peter said he was going fishing the others said, “we’re going with you.” A lie I have told myself at low points in my life is that my actions don’t affect others—that I am alone, invisible, unimportant. But experience has proved otherwise. Even when I’ve been the most self-negating and in the grips of depression I’ve been aware of a gravitational pull around me. Others would get pulled in. That was the worst part, in fact: to see the affect my violence toward myself had on others and feeling helpless to stop it.

I am also able to look back at those periods in my life without judgment, with compassion towards myself. It wasn’t my fault the net was empty. I’d done everything I thought I was supposed to do and nothing was going right.

But with morning, sometimes things can shift. A resurrected Jesus stands on the shore, unrecognized, and offers some advice, some guidance. And as absurd or counter-intuitive it seems, it works. I can think of a few times when I’ve received guidance, from individuals or groups. One was a lifeskills class that I had the privilege of participating in . I learned so much from everyone in that class, not only the facilitators. Another was a Buddhist monk with whom I met to meditate first thing in the morning for a while. She was very insightful and intuitive. Yet another was a group of women with whom I met once a month or so to share our hopes and dreams, sifting through them to identify our real heart’s desire. And that biblical promise in Psalm 37 that if we delight ourselves in the Sovereign they will give us the desires of our heart is for real—but I might not have known that if I hadn’t done that work and figured out what that desire looks and feels like: love, peace, purpose.

Small adjustments, shifts in perspectives, priorities, and my empty net slowly started to fill. I think the thing about Peter I most identify with is that he’s a slow thinker, it takes him a while to figure things out. And for me, recognizing Jesus in and through practices and through the eyes of my heart also happened gradually, and finally awakened as foolish joy. The kind where you throw on your clothes and then jump in the lake.

I found recognizing the promptings of the Holy Spirit first required watching and following them for a while. It is not a merely mental recognition but more of a body and soul knowing, and getting there requires time and, sometimes, discipline. Getting reattuned and rewired. Behaviour affects cognition affects emotions and, sometimes, something new grows inside—awareness like a pregnancy. The net is like a spiritual womb filling and yet not breaking. But the awareness is still not complete.

First the disciples are invited to share the fish they caught, even though there’s already fish cooking. I think this is such an important piece. Because another lie I’ve told myself is that my gifts are redundant and unnecessary. Someone else can do it, or offer much better, so who am I to bring my fish to the table?

And again, Peter’s thought process is so slow you can almost see it: *Oh right, I kind of abandoned my friends and left them with that heavy net—I guess I should help.*

I also can think of examples of times I was invited to share what I had and it was valued—even when I wasn't identifying as Christian. And these invitations gradually shifted my opinions of the church and followers of Christ. The reality is that there is no reason that as followers of Christ we need to be closed-minded. Quite the opposite. And we're called to be servants, not judges, of others.

One beautiful example was when I was practicing Buddhism. I remember having a long chat with my mum. She listened so deeply and asked lots of questions. As our conversation came to a close she said something like, "It seems like a good religion." And this from someone whom some might write-off and label as an "evangelical fundamentalist."

By the way, I truly believe that if more liberal or progressive Christians and traditional or fundamentalist Christians took more time—if only out of a biblical directive to love one another like family—to really listen to each other, we would all benefit. There is no one who is not worth listening to. I think there's a lot of fruitless polarization and some bridges that are really waiting to be built between communities of faith. And that we should be able to figure out a way to do so without sacrificing our principles or compromising the safety of our most vulnerable members.

I also actually worked for a church as an administrator even though I didn't, at that time, identify as Christian (yeah, I was also a vegetarian meat wrapper once. You do what you've got to do. Life is weird.) Working as the church administrator I had that one-step back perspective and gained quite a lot of respect for how that particular community of faith sought justice together and was actively welcoming and affirming; all, again, gradually shifting my understanding of what a church community could be. And I wouldn't have experienced that if my fish had not been wanted at the feast.

The feast. This is the hardest part to just talk about, partly because, again, it isn't just an intellectual connection or understanding but is as much, or more, from the heart, soul and body. Jesus reveals himself by serving and sharing food. It is intimate, joyful, celebratory and mysterious. What sustains and nourishes us as individuals and a community? This is impossible to explain and really must be experienced: as it says, "taste and see that the Sovereign is good."

Some of the practices that nourish me spiritually are participating in worship services, reading and meditating on bible passages, chanting or singing alone or in a group, walking, repeating the Jesus prayer over and over again throughout the day, praying alone or with others and sometimes just praying for people I see as I walk down the street.

I'd like to share a small song I wrote after reflecting on my faith journey and meditating on Psalm 16:

*My life was yours
My life was yours
My life was yours
all along*

*And one day we'll meet you
face to face
and one day you'll teach us
all about your grace
It was there
Oh it was there
It was there all along*

*I bless the Lord who gives me counsel
In the night, also, my heart instructs me
You show me the path of life
In you there is fullness of joy
In your right hand there are pleasures forever more*

*My life was yours
My life was yours
My life was yours
all along*

But like all good love stories, Peter's didn't end with the wedding feast and neither does mine. After dinner, Jesus catches him off guard with the most brave and vulnerable question anyone will ask: "Do you love me?" This has been one of the most transformative divine revelations I've experienced: the realization that my love is a necessary ingredient. We talk about parental love a lot: God as mother or father. But this is different. I don't ask my children if they love me. And maybe that's partly what's perplexing for Peter. Jesus is his teacher, mentor, master, a kind of parental figure. He even uses the word "children" when he calls to the disciples from the shore. But here he's presenting as someone vulnerable and childlike who needs this reassurance, this profession of love drawn out not once but repeatedly. There is an important paradox presented here. Jesus is the shepherd, but he is also the lamb. We all need to be loved and cared for and that is also our divine task and privilege: to share our love with one another.

I think this imperative is presented in different ways through out the gospels: that is, the need to be born again from above and to enter the kingdom of God like a child. There are many biblical uses of birthing or labour as a metaphor. We are told Creation is groaning with labour pains, as is the kingdom of God. This is such a hopeful metaphor for me. As you may know, I have had the privilege of giving birth to two children and I have to say that doing so has transformed me more than anything else I've experienced. I see Jesus re-presenting in this passage much like a newborn child entering the world for the first time, both bringing and seeking love. And that presentation, that newborn revelation can only transform Peter little by little into the loving servant he is meant to be. Because after looking into the face of a resurrected and newly reborn Jesus, it's going to be hard to not see other people differently. Plus, he has, through this gracious interaction, been offered a model of how to be weak and vulnerable and brave in how he presents to others. He can ask the same disarming question, with or without words. "Do you love me?"

And as result, a servant girl named Rhoda will one day be so insistently joyful and loving that she will make a clownish mistake (as we all do at times) and it will be OK, even celebrated and remembered and past down like a funny family story. I'd like to linger here for a moment because I love Rhoda with all my heart and feel so affirmed and encouraged by her. Nobody believed her when she told them that Peter was at the door but she insisted. Even though they called her crazy. I've been called crazy and know how disempowering that can be, how it can silence a person. But she keeps insisting and Peter keeps knocking and soon they're all celebrating the miracle of Peter's deliverance from prison. Such a brave and beautiful fool she is. I aspire to be like her.

I believe that loving and serving will come as naturally as breathing when we all allow ourselves to be reborn to each other moment by moment. Then we will be known by God and know God in each other. In 1 John 4 it says "No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwells in us and God's love is perfected in us."

I have one more song I'd like to share that describes some of the pieces of my spiritual journey that I've just described. As I do so, know I greatly desire to hear more of your stories and experiences as well sometime soon.

*Life is like a baby pulling at my face
Life is like a baby tugging at my breast
Life is like a baby pulling at my face
Life is like a baby tugging at my breast*

*I don't know where I'm supposed to go
I don't know what I'm meant to be
and when I ask you
all you seem to tell me
is that you love me*

*Oh, I don't know
when this emptiness fills my soul
and my fears escape me
I've been a fool for love before
He says "I will not abandon you
or forsake you, follow me"*

Sing Kyrie, sing Kyrie, sing Kyrie, sing Kyrie

*Life is like a baby pulling on my face
Life is like a baby tugging at my breast
Life is like a baby pulling on my face
Life is like a baby tugging at my breast*

*I've carried you so long
and soon you'll be so big and so strong
I've carried you so long
I think dying's a lot like being born*

*You don't know where you're supposed to go
You don't know what you're meant to be
And when you ask me
All that I can tell you
Is that I love you*

*Oh I don't know when this emptiness fills my soul
and my fears escape me
I've been a fool for love before
she says "I will not abandon you or forsake you, follow me"*

Sing Kyrie, sing Kyrie, sing Kyrie, sing Kyrie