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'... do you love me?'

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After he ate breakfast with them, Jesus said, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

John 21:15

Empathy is in the news as either a laudable or lamentable quality in a Supreme Court justice. It is a high standard, perhaps higher than a verbatim recall of all of Constitutional law, its precedents and applications. Empathy suggests the highest, most mature discernment, requiring both head and heart, what Solomon had when he risked the child to determine its real mother.

In the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," Tevye and Golde, the parents of daughters breaking tradition for love, engage in their own stand off about what is essential in the midst of terrible ambiguity, changing cultural earthquakes that seem to uproot principles. "Do you love me?" he asks her. It is the hardest question of all. How many relationships, among the married and in families, dating couples or old friends, would fall today if the question were pressed home? What is proof of love? Is it depth of feeling or length of commitment? Is it about quality or quantity? If asked at all, it should be whispered over a candlelight supper, but never over breakfast. Who is loving or lovable at breakfast?

As the disciples approach Pentecost, the hour of empowerment after Jesus' Ascension, the final exam is not about doctrine, faith and morals, but about love. It helps to know the creed, believe it and act accordingly, but underlying all of these is the relationship itself. "Do you love me?" Ask it of yourself three times today and you will know why we all need Pentecost.

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