

# The Sheep Feeding Business

John 21:1-19  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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April 18, 2010

Even though I have been familiar with the story we have just heard from John 21 for quite some time, I have never preached on this particular passage before. I think part of the reason why is that in the past, while serving at other churches, I just didn't want to get into the whole debate of whether or not this post-resurrection story represented the reporting of an actual historical event.

For those of you who were here a couple of weeks ago on Easter Sunday, however, you know that I have personally arrived at a place (theologically and biblically) where I can, with all honesty and integrity, respond that **it doesn't really matter.**

In other words, for those who *need* this to be the literal reporting of an actual event, fine. But for those who choose to see it as a story that uses metaphorical language to reveal its truths, that's fine, too.

So now that we have that cleared up, let's look at what this story is all about, what the author may have been hoping to achieve, and what meaning it can have for our own journey of faith.

As a matter of record, most biblical scholars now believe that this final chapter in the Gospel of John is a later addition, or postscript, or epilogue to the gospel that most likely originally ended with chapter 20. While this in no way lessens its importance, as an epilogue it most likely was written to address some current issues in the faith community of the initial readers.

**At the heart of this chapter lies the presence of Christ recommissioning the disciples and challenging them to become servant leaders.** There are three distinct scenes in this story that I want to walk through in kind of a Bible study fashion.

**The first scene** revolves around the decision of Peter and the disciples to go fishing, their failure to catch anything, and Jesus at first an unrecognized figure on the shore, directing the disciples to a remarkable haul of fish.

An interesting place to start is to ask: Why were the disciples fishing? Perhaps it's to indicate that they were unable to sustain Jesus' mission beyond Easter. Belief in the resurrection was an item of faith, but it had not yet been translated into life and mission in the world.

It's kind of like when we have an intense mountaintop-like spiritual experience, only to find that zeal soon fade away, followed by a spiritual lull when one returns to the same things he or she has always done.

Perhaps the disciples were just returning to the familiarity of what they knew best – their everyday lives. If so, I like what that says about Christ, **the presence of God, coming to us where we are, meeting us in the events and routines of our everyday lives.**

It's important to note that after an entire night of fishing, the disciples have caught nothing. Interestingly, however, even though the disciples have not yet recognized Jesus yet for who he is, they nevertheless explicitly follow his instructions

about casting their nets to the other side of the boat. The result is a remarkably abundant catch of fish, making this yet another gospel story that reveals the abundant provision and grace of God.

The point the author is trying to make may be that **obedience precedes recognition, and in their obedience the disciples discover that they are in the presence of the Lord** – a point Albert Schweitzer eloquently makes in the conclusion to his 1910 book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*:

He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they will pass through in this fellowship, and, as in ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who he is.

**Is it not often true that it is while we are already engaged in the work of ministry that we then recognize the presence of God with us?**

So, in looking at this scene symbolically, we can see it as a statement about the mission of the church, even our community of faith. Disciples, whose efforts at fishing (i.e. the ministry of evangelism) are without success, obey the voice of Christ, and then their nets overflow with a huge catch of fish. I'm not exactly sure how we should apply that here at College Hill, but is something to think about.

**The second scene** finds Jesus on the shore welcoming the disciples and providing them a breakfast of fish and bread. This breakfast by the sea certainly recalls some of the most meaningful moments of table fellowship during Jesus' ministry, perhaps even with overtones of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Early in the thinking and practice of the ancient church, eating together was an occasion for experiencing the presence of Christ – as I hope we will during our Potluck Luncheon after church today, and when we gather in groups of 7 or 8 in our Small Group Dinners program. **Eating together, then and now, can confirm and encourage faith even as we face the hard realities of life.**

This rather bizarre story of Jesus eating and drinking *after* his resurrection also may have been used in the ancient theological argument and Christological debate of whether Jesus of Nazareth was ever actually a real-life human being, or just an apparition of some kind, as some believed. The author clearly comes down on the side that Jesus, clearly understood as the Son of God, was indeed a very real human being, and not just God *pretending* to be a flesh and blood person.

One additional comment about the meal that Jesus prepares for the disciples. We discover the image of support and sustenance, provided by Jesus for disciples weary with a night of fishing. Even before Peter finally draws the full net of fish ashore, Jesus as host has prepared the meal, and later serves it to his hungry guests. It turns out to be a time of renewal for the disciples.

We can interpret this to mean that Jesus, and therefore God, is sensitive to people's physical needs as well as spiritual needs. **At our best, then, the church follows Jesus' example by feeding, clothing, housing, and educating people. Our concern for people's physical needs not only helps to relieve human suffering, but also constitutes a powerful spiritual witness.**

This leads beautifully into **the third scene** of this story. This is where Jesus addresses Peter directly, referring to him by his former name, Simon, son of John.

Three times Jesus questions Peter about his devotion by asking him if he loves him. This may have functioned as a way to counterbalance Peter's three denials of Jesus during his trial. In other words, **while there is accountability for our words and actions, there is also forgiveness, redemption, and the reinstatement of relationship.**

Three times Peter responds that he does indeed love Jesus. With each proclamation, Jesus responds with a commissioning of Peter to "Feed my lambs," "Tend my sheep," and "Feed my sheep." Peter is commissioned by Jesus to be a shepherd with responsibility for the flock. And note that the basic qualification for Christian service is love. Other qualities may be desirable, but love is completely indispensable.

**The questions and answers between Jesus and Peter dissolve any distinctions between loving Jesus and serving others.** For Peter, loving Jesus means caring for Jesus' sheep. To make sure pride doesn't mess things up, notice that in all three declarations, Jesus calls them, "my sheep" not Peter's sheep. I think that pastors and church leaders sometimes forget this.

It's important to contrast the biblical imagery of fishing with shepherding. **"Fishing for people" is primarily an evangelistic role** – sharing the good news with all people, and inviting them to join the community of faith. That indeed is a very important part of our mission. **Shepherding takes on a more pastoral role.** This refers to the growth and nurture within the community of faith, and caring for the health and well-being of others. Therefore, **for those of us who claim to love God, we are commissioned to put that love into practice and action by feeding and tending to those whom Jesus loves.** Jesus is calling Peter, and us, to love Jesus' sheep as he has loved them.

So in essence, **we as a congregation are to be involved in the sheep feeding business.** That can mean many things. It should specifically remind us of the importance of Christian Education, shared worship and fellowship, and pastoral care extended to one another. Our words of love must be matched by a life of love. This story indicates that our love of God will be evidenced when we nurture and care for others, not apart from that care. It's like any kind of vow we take. It may be a wedding vow, an ordination vow, a baptism vow, or whatever. **We begin with words, but we finish with deeds.**

This story also reminds us that this kind of loving discipleship will not always be easy, that risk is involved. For Peter, in fact, it led to martyrdom. Nonetheless, we are left with the same invitation that Jesus left Peter with: **"Follow me."**

**So be thinking this week about how you personally respond to Jesus' question, "Do you love me?" If, like Peter, you respond, "Yes, I love you," then be prepared to be commissioned to feed and tend God's flock.**

Let me close with this short quote, from a person I don't think I've ever quoted before, George Herbert Walker Bush:

We all have something to give.  
So if you know how to read, find someone who can't.  
If you've got a hammer, find a nail.  
If you're not hungry, not lonely, not in trouble –  
seek out someone who is.

How are you, and will you, live out your commissioning in the sheep feeding business?

Amen.