

# We're In the Sheep-Tending Business

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

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Airline travel can be quite interesting, to say the least. I don't fly very often, but I did this past week to and from Louisville, Kentucky – a destination, like most everywhere else, that isn't a direct flight from Tulsa.

I attended a Leader Briefing, hosted by the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA), for those responsible for guiding the 13 committees at the General Assembly of our denomination at the gathering in June in Portland, Oregon. I'll be sharing more of all those goings-on as we get closer to the date. Know for now that it was a very meaningful gathering.

One of the interesting conversations that often takes place whenever you get a bunch of ministers together is to hear about the lengths we go to in order to *not* tell the person we're sitting next to on a plane that we're a pastor. In order to avoid getting into a deep pastoral counseling session, the most common response when asked what we do for a living is to say that we're in social work, which is basically true. But after preparing this sermon based on the Gospel reading we just heard from John 21, I think I'm now going to respond: I'm in the sheep-tending business! At the very least that promises a strange and confused look by the person sitting next to me on a plane. As you'll see by the end of this sermon, **we're all in the sheep-tending business.**

This biblical story is a post-resurrection tale that begins with a miraculous catch of fish, followed by the risen Jesus eating breakfast with some of his disciples. A majority of modern biblical scholars believe that this story may actually be an **epilogue**, added after the gospel was first finished, and perhaps by a different author. If so, it most likely was written to address some theological debate or practical issue in that original faith community, a couple of generations after Jesus' death. Perhaps someone felt that there was something left unfinished or unclear in the main story. Many of those scholars believe it had to do with ongoing arguments about the **the nature of Jesus** himself.

Let's talk heresies for a bit. Some in the early Christian church **denied the full divinity of Jesus**, a heresy known as **Arianism**. In trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, they claimed that Jesus the Son was of *similar* but not the *same* substance of God the Father. Their motto was, "There was a time when he was not." In their view, God created Jesus. This meant Jesus was not pre-existing with or identical to God.

On the other side of the spectrum, there were those who **denied Jesus' full humanity**. Before it was declared an official church heresy by the adoption of the Nicene Creed in 325 CE, **Docetism**, as it was called, claimed that Jesus' physical body was simply an *illusion* or *apparition*, that God took a form simply to *appear* human. It is the opinion of many biblical scholars that one reason why this post-resurrection story in John 21 was added to the gospel was to give credence to their understanding that Jesus was indeed fully human.

Orthodoxy, “right belief,” took a both/and understanding of Jesus’ divinity and humanity, rather than an either/or approach. After all, if Jesus, after he rose from the dead, was able to eat a breakfast of fish and bread with his disciples, then he must be human as well as divine. The divine part was a given in the Gospel of John.

Yet, even though a **Christological debate** over the nature of Jesus is indeed important, perhaps a more compelling reason for adding this story deals with the **practical application of living a Christian life**.

I admit that **many folks in our day and age, including some in this congregation, have issues with the term ‘Christian’ – at least as defined by those in organized religion who think you have to give intellectual consent to specific theological beliefs and doctrines in order to call oneself a Christian**. For many, especially in younger generations, the term ‘Christian’ now has more negative connotations (narrow, judgmental) and positive ones (community, spirituality). If that includes you, as it does me, perhaps you may be **more comfortable with simply calling yourself a follower of Jesus** – what the late Rev. Dr. Harold Hill called a **Jesusite**, which is how he described himself. That’s a way to say **we seek to approach a life of faith guided more by the life and ministry modeled by Jesus than by the doctrinal decrees of organized religion**. Or to put it in progressive Christianity terminology, we emphasize the “Jesus of history” side of the equation more than the “Christ of faith” side of the equation.

Now I’m sure there’s some heresy involved in all this somewhere, but it’s something with which I, many of you, and a growing number of progressive Christians aren’t afraid to be associated.

Speaking of following Jesus’ teachings, here’s where this story in John 21 can have a great impact on our own community of faith. This story incorporates **two of the greatest metaphors for the mission of the church – fishing** (which deals with discipleship in the form of **evangelism** – sharing the good news and drawing others into the kingdom of God) and **shepherding** (which deals with discipleship in the form of the **pastoral care** of others).

The gospel writers used fishing in a symbolic way to express both the abundance of God’s grace (as represented by such a large catch of fish) and the church’s mission of evangelism – to reach out to others with good news and call them, through the Holy Spirit, into the community of faith. Any time a fishing story is told in the gospels, there is an element of evangelism, of reaching out, involved in its interpretation and application.

But then what? If you find yourself an active participant in a community of faith, what are you supposed to do with that? This is when the figurative language in the story shifts from fishing to **shepherding - the “Now what?” part of our life and ministry**.

After Jesus and the disciples finish their breakfast of fish and bread, Jesus asks Simon Peter three times if he loves him. Each time Peter responds with a resounding, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Given the historically important role of Peter in the development of the Christian Church, biblical scholars believe that this postscript chapter in the Gospel of John was needed to mend Peter’s reputation. Even though Peter is mentioned as one of the disciples who ran to the empty tomb on Easter morning, we are more prominently left with the story of Peter denying Jesus three times after Jesus’ arrest. **It is believed that perhaps the author of this story had Jesus ask Peter three times if he loves him in order to negate the three times Peter previously denied him. The effect is to restore the relationship between Peter and Jesus – and thus Peter’s role in the history of the Christian movement.**

Next comes perhaps the most important part of the story. It reveals what we are to do once we confess love for Jesus, as in following the greatest commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. **If we seek to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus, then our response to loving God is to nurture and care for others – both inside and outside these church walls.** Using the metaphorical language of shepherding (commonly used in the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures), the author puts on the lips of Jesus the instructions to Peter, “Feed my lambs,” “Tend my sheep,” and “Feed my sheep.” **That, in a nutshell, is our mission as the church,** the body of Christ, the ones committed to following through with the ministry begun and modeled by Jesus.

**This simple exchange between Jesus and Peter dissolves any distinctions between loving Jesus and God, and serving others – between worship and service. The two go hand in hand! This becomes the very framework for our discipleship, and expresses how we practice resurrection in the here and now: the care for and the seeking to fulfill people’s physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.**

This story concludes, however, by reminding us that this kind of loving discipleship will not always be risk free. For Peter, in fact, it led to his martyrdom. Nonetheless, we are left with the same invitation to which Jesus left Peter: **“Follow me.”**

Be thinking this week about how you personally respond to Jesus’ question, “Do you love me?” If, like Peter, you as an individual, or we together as a congregation, respond, “Yes, I love you,” then be prepared to **acknowledge and accept that we are commissioned to feed and tend God’s flock.** For us, we believe that includes all people – including one another in this congregation.

I want to close with a short quote that I shared with you three years ago that provides a good illustration of **putting sheep-tending into action.** It’s from a person I rarely quote, former President 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.*

And in order to avoid those awkward airline flight conversations in the future, I think I will indeed start responding that I’m simply in the sheep-tending business.

Amen.