

Feeding Sheep (we're all sheep)

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

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After last Sunday's excursion into personal and congregational lament, I want to begin this sermon with a tie-in back to my Easter Sunday sermon. Like the stories of Jesus' resurrection themselves, the post-resurrection stories, including the one we just heard from the Gospel of John, are taken by various people either as the sharing of literal, historical truth, or as revealing a metaphorical truth. A biblically and theologically progressive perspective leans toward the latter. Therefore, **we will focus on the question, "What does it mean?" rather than, "Did it really happen?"** So, let's take a look.

It's not too surprising that those of Jesus' disciples who were fishermen were back practicing their profession. They have been up the entire night without catching a single fish. Just as the sun is rising on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus, whom the disciples don't recognize, sees that they have caught no fish and tells them to cast their net to the right side of the boat. For some unexplained reason these professional fishermen decide to obediently follow these instructions from some guy standing on the shoreline. The result is that so many fish were caught they weren't even able to haul them into the boat. **We learn something here about reaping the benefits of following Jesus' teaching and instruction.**

After the disciple whom Jesus loved recognizes it is Jesus, Peter jumps into the water and swims ashore as the other disciples drag in the net full of fish. A bit surprisingly, Jesus has a fire going and is already cooking fish, and even has bread. He adds some fish that the disciples have caught to this meal. **We are being reminded that Jesus isn't just a teacher, he's also a provider.** And the meal of fish and bread certainly harkens back to the miraculous provision story of the feeding of the 5000.

After the breaking of bread, as in communing with Jesus, we reach the climax of the story – the encounter between Jesus and Peter. 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 early Christian Church, most notably (as tradition goes) as its first pope, **many biblical scholars believe that this story is actually a later postscript chapter added to the Gospel of John, perhaps even by a different author, in order 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 in John 21 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.**

But now comes the most important part of the story – Jesus' commission to Peter, and therefore Jesus' commission to those of us who seek to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. We learn that when we follow the ways of Jesus **our response to**

loving God is to nurture and care for others. Using the metaphorical language of shepherding, the gospel writer puts on the lips of Jesus the instruction 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 what it means to love Jesus and to serve others. That includes serving each other, for after all, we're all sheep of God's pasture.

Our words of love, therefore, must be matched by living a life of love. This becomes the very framework for our discipleship – feeding, tending, caring for one another. And though it may be sexist to say so, on this Mother's Day (and more broadly on this Celebration of Women Sunday) women do indeed perhaps model this best. Our love for one must be put into action and practice by tending/feeding Jesus' sheep, and especially those in need. **That is how we practice resurrection in the here and now.**

To put this in even more dramatic terms, **Jesus entrusted Peter, you and I, and us together, with the sacred work of Jesus himself as the Good Shepherd, tending and feeding the sheep.** At our best, then, we will follow this example by feeding, clothing, housing, educating, comforting, and nurturing people, helping to alleviate their and each other's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. **And sometimes, like Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we may have to head out to find the lost, vulnerable, frightened, perhaps desperate sheep, offering them the compassion offered to you and me when we were lost, afraid, lonely, at our wits end, and not sure at times if we were loved.** So like in the biblical story, sometimes we may have to throw our nets to the other side.

This story in John 21 concludes, however, by reminding us that this kind of loving and serving discipleship will not always be easy, that risk is involved. For Peter, in fact, it led to his martyrdom. Nonetheless, **we are left with the same final command to which Jesus left Peter: "Follow me."** To flesh all this out just a bit, I want to share a short quote, from 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.

I encourage you to reflect this week on how you, and we together as College Hill, are living out our commission to nurture, tend, and feed Jesus' sheep, the children of God. And again, as a reminder, **don't forget that each and every one of us is among that flock of sheep. We all need tending and feeding.**

Amen.