

Feeding the Flock

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

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May 1, 2022

When it comes to interpreting certain biblical stories, especially those in which many Christians today simply cannot accept on a literal historical level, I like to preface them with what I was told was an old Native American storyteller's approach. **"I don't know if what I'm about to tell you really happened, but I know that it's true."** That's a great context for a progressive approach to Christianity and biblical interpretation. It was reflected in the title of Marcus Borg's very influential 2001 book, "Reading the Bible Again For the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally." The point is, **biblical stories don't need to be interpreted literally to reveal particular truths and point us to a deeper understanding of the nature and character of God.**

Today's gospel reading from John 21 is an excellent example, the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus at the shore of the Sea of Galilee preparing and eating breakfast with some of his disciples after a miraculous catch of fish. Therefore, whether taken literally or metaphorically, 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, individually and as a community of faith.

In the previous chapter, John 20, Jesus, in a post-resurrection appearance with his disciples behind closed doors, shows them his wounds, breathes on them to receive the Holy Spirit, and commissions them to go out into the world to proclaim, forgive, and heal: **"As God has sent me, so I send you** (John 20:21). By the way, to **"sent out/forth"** is the English translation of the word **apostle**.

As we move into Chapter 21 the flow of this story begins with a first scene revealing how a group of disciples **recognize Jesus**. That happens in the midst of their familiar comfortable routine, having gone back to fishing. That, of course, **reveals how God, without wearing a name tag, can interrupt and be recognized in and within our own ordinary daily routines, our own ordinary weekly gatherings for worship and fellowship**. A legitimate question to ask of this story, however, is **why these disciples went back to fishing**, to their old lives, especially after they had just been commissioned and sent out by Jesus to continue his work and ministry. This may have something to do with shame and humiliation, especially on the part of Peter, which I want to skip ahead in the story to address now.

This scene reveals an intimate conversation between Jesus and Peter, who Jesus refers to formally as Simon, son of John, instead of his given nickname, Peter. Sounds like when a parent or loved one used to, or uses, our full name, thus alerting us that something serious is about to take place. **Three times Jesus questions Peter about his devotion by asking him if he loves him**. This is believed to have functioned to **counterbalance the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus during Jesus' trial that led to his crucifixion**. Peter abandoned Jesus in his time of greatest need. Peter would have felt shame and humiliation at his failure.

Reflecting on this perspective of shame, something I have never thought of before, Teri McDowell Ott, editor and publisher of *The Presbyterian Outlook* wrote just this week:

In her book Daring Greatly, Brené Brown writes about the destructive power of shame, “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” Shame is rooted, Brown writes, in our fear of disconnection: “the fear that something we’ve done or failed to do, an ideal that we’ve not lived up to, or a goal that we’ve not accomplished makes us unworthy of connection.”

These powerful feelings of shame can lead us to self-destructive and relationship-destructive behaviors. Shame keeps us from being vulnerable and real. We find ourselves attacking or disengaging to feel better or to protect ourselves from further harm. This Sunday’s text from John 21:1-19 narrates... Peter’s chance at redemption.

As previously mentioned, paralleling his three-fold denial, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Peter answers each time, **“Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” thus breaking free of his shame, reconnecting with Jesus, and embracing the healing and wholeness Jesus offers.** Ott continues:

We all experience shame. We all harbor feelings of unworthiness, especially after we do or say something that is not representative of our best selves. **What matters more than our shame, though, is how we respond...** The hope Jesus offers in this beautiful scene with Peter is the hope of redemption. No matter what we have done, what we have said, or how we feel about ourselves, Jesus welcomes. Jesus receives. Jesus makes us whole.

It takes a lot of courage, then, when we are faced and dealing with shame and humiliation. But Jesus doesn’t leave it there with Peter, nor with us. It’s like Jesus doubles back to those who have given up to affirm and encourage them, us, back into the fold. To each of Peter’s declarations of love, Jesus responds with a task, a charge, a mission: tend/feed my lambs/sheep. **After any failure, as Peter certainly experienced, we are given a path to forgiveness, restoration, and new beginnings, a 2nd and 3rd chance, so to speak. That’s part of the very promise of Easter.**

That new freedom to move forward comes in the form of **the inseparable connection between loving God and loving our neighbors. Feeding the flock is that connection.** That is why it is so frustrating to so many of us to hear folks, including politicians, boldly declare their love of Jesus, yet do little to nothing to actually help those most in need. That a disconnect. It is a scandal to the gospel and the ways and teaching of Jesus!

What we learn, therefore, is Jesus’ encounter with Peter, and God’s encounter with you and me, is both **consoling and challenging.** The biblical commentary from saltproject.org, in their “Takeaways” section reflects on **why Peter and the disciples have gone back to fishing, and why we often do the same by going back to our old routines.**

...faced with our own shortcomings, we suspect we are disqualified, or unqualified, or in any case incapable of contributing to the movement. We drift back to our old lives in Galilee. Or perhaps we sense the power of new life, the promise of the risen Jesus, even the helpful contributions we might make — but we're afraid. Being a disciple is one thing, following along beside the good rabbi; but being an apostle is another, "sent forth" up ahead into the unknown. And so we draw back. We retreat. We return to what we know, letting down and pulling up the old, empty nets...

It is my fervent hope and prayer that that's not what we do – simply return to what we know, and to what is comfortable – as we move into a post-pandemic way of being the church. For as the commentary continues, "**But Jesus will not let us go. Though we may waver, Jesus continues to believe. God knows our shortcomings — and calls and sends us anyway.** God knows our fears, and nevertheless looks us in the eye and says (three times!), Feed my sheep."

All this reflects Peter's, and perhaps our, **reluctance to the re-engage in the commissioning to which we are called, often because of our fear of failure or lack of courage.** The commentary continues:

But Jesus is having none of it: [it's like he's saying] This isn't about your failure or your fears. Do you love me? Then feed my sheep! Stop dwelling on what you did or didn't do in the past, or even what you can or cannot do in the future. Stop focusing on your limits, and focus on your love. Do you love me? (Peter replies, Well, of course I love you, you know that —) Then feed my sheep! It's that simple. **Step up and get to work. I've sent you, and I know whom I'm sending. I believe in you. Now, go!**

Perhaps this is the charge and commissioning we need to hear again, responding courageously by taking action to work our way out of these past two years of pandemic disorientation. With new freedom, restoration, and renewed focus, let us move forward, as individuals and as a community of faith, to **let God's love for us and our love for God lead into our love of neighbor** – for we all are sheep and part of God's flock, and all need to be fed.

Amen.

Resources:

Teri McDowell Ott, "Lectionary Reflection, 3rd Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022", *The Presbyterian Outlook*.

"Love in Action: SALT's Commentary for Easter 3", saltproject.org, 4-25-22.

Patrick W.T. Johnson, "Homiletical Perspective, John 21:15-19", *Feasting on the Gospels*.

Kiki Barns, "Called and called back", christiancentury.org, 4-25-22.