

# Wandering Heart: Here's my heart

## "Feed My Sheep"

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

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Palm Sunday – Maundy Thursday – Good Friday – Easter. The events represented in these stories, marking the last week in Jesus' life, run the full gamut of emotions. They are exhilarating, exhausting, reflective, tragic, and highly-charged. There's celebration, fellowship, denial, death, and resurrection to new life. **But that's not where the story ends. There's an epilogue following the resurrection that helps address the question, "What's next?" "Where do we go from here?"** That's what the 21<sup>st</sup> and final chapter in the Gospel of John helps answer, both for the early church and for us today.

Since the beginning of the season of Lent, a month and a half ago, a special focus has been placed on the disciple named Simon, son of John, or Simon Peter, or just Peter. Our Lenten resource, **A Sanctified Art**, has led us through many stories where Peter plays an important role, revealing much about him and his journey of faith. In putting ourselves into Peter's shoes, we have learned much about ourselves as well. **In many instances, our journeys of faith have parallels with Peter, especially when it comes to times of being confused, misunderstanding who Jesus really is, and what he is calling us to be and do.**

This is the final week in this series focusing on Peter, and there's logic in adding this extra Sunday to our study, even though we are now in a new church season, the season of Easter.

**So then, what comes next after the Resurrection??** There's an entire genre of biblical accounts identified as post-resurrection narratives. Of the stories reported of Jesus appearing after the resurrection, we will explore Jesus' appearance along the shore of Galilee. Some of his disciples have gone back to fishing, a profession and routine in which they found themselves back in familiar and comfortable territory. They were fishing all night and had caught nothing. Jesus tells them to throw their nets to the other side of the boat, after which their nets were full of fish. Peter, recognizing Jesus, jumps out of the boat to swim to the shore to meet Jesus, followed by those in the boat filled with fish. After breakfast, the focus of the story shifts to **a conversation between Jesus and Peter. This is a profoundly important story and lesson for the life, mission, and ministry of the church.**

Reflecting back to where we began on the First Sunday in Lent, we come full circle with Peter. Our resource material summarizes it this way.

Peter has dropped his nets, walked on water, professed his faith, been rebuked, received footwashing, denied Jesus, and ran to the tomb. And now, Jesus once again meets him at the shoreline where Peter is casting his nets.

Jesus offers abundant nourishment and also a new command: "Feed my sheep." Then he turns to Peter and asks three times, "Do you love me?" It's as if Jesus says, "Here's my heart," which washes over Peter's three denials like a healing balm.

No matter how far we wander, may we entrust our hearts to God. No matter if our faith is strong or weak, what we can give is our love.

We are again reminded that **Peter's journey isn't linear, rather it is filled with ups and downs, affirmations and misunderstandings. As are our journeys. But we also learn that God's grace continues to circle back to Peter again and again. As it does to us.** Resource biblical commentator, Dr. Karoline Lewis, gets to the heart of the meaning of this story.

It is in this context that we need to hear the conversation between Jesus and Peter. **There is neither shaming nor blaming...** Instead, Jesus knows that what he will ask Peter to do is something Peter could not fathom before. Only now, in this renewal of relationship with the resurrected Jesus is Peter's trust affirmed, and Jesus' trust in Peter confirmed.

Jesus needs Peter to be the good shepherd now—to provide pasture, to protect the sheep from wolves, thieves, and bandits so that the sheep may have abundant life (John 10:10). That's a tall order. But how can God so love the world without us?

**We are not just called to do loving things, but to be the very presence of love,** the “I AM” in the world when Jesus cannot be.

Since the word “shame” is used, let's take a closer look at that element in this story, and how it relates to the story of our own lives. As mentioned, 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. Like in any culture throughout time, Peter would have felt shame and humiliation at his failure. Reflecting on this perspective of shame, **Teri McDowell Ott**, editor and publisher of *The Presbyterian Outlook* writes:

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.”**

I acknowledge that I, and perhaps yourself, can relate to this. However, this Sunday's text from John 21:1-19 narrates Peter's chance, and therefore our own, at **redemption.** Once again, intentionally paralleling Peter's three-fold denial, Jesus asks him 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.**

Jesus, however, doesn't leave it there with Peter, nor with us. **With redemption and the restoration of relationship, Jesus responds with a task, a charge, a mission: tend and feed my sheep.** That means that every time we fail or fall short, as Peter certainly did, we are given a path to forgiveness, restoration, and new beginnings. That's part of the very promise of Easter. **New freedom to move forward in life and ministry comes in the form of the inseparable connection between loving God and loving our neighbors. We learn that feeding the flock is part of that connection.** Therefore, we must ask of ourselves:

- How am I feeding and tending to others, both within and outside this community of faith?

**Sometimes our initial response, like Peter when he went back to fishing, is to draw back, retreat, return to what we know, letting down and pulling up the old, empty nets. It is my fervent hope and prayer that we don't simply return to what we know, to what is routine and comfortable territory.**

Upon reading this biblical story again this week, I found something, while obvious in the biblical text, I hadn't really paid any attention to before. After the entire exchange with Peter, **Jesus' final directive to Peter is also the very first one he gave to him and the disciples, "Follow me."** To follow Jesus, as we learn throughout the gospels, entails many things. While the most important is to love God and our neighbors as ourselves – to love one another, **we are commissioned to the ministry and work of a shepherd. We are called to tend and feed one another, whether that be spiritually, emotionally, or with nurturing acts of generosity, kindness, and the God-given blessing of being in caring relationships with one another.** For we are all sheep of God's pasture. We all need to be feed and tended. That is how Jesus shared his heart with us, and how we are to share our hearts in return. **This is the "Now what?" following the resurrection.** Ending with a quote I have shared before from 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.

Amen.

Resources:

- Teri McDowell Ott, "Lectionary Reflection, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2022", *The Presbyterian Outlook*.  
"Love in Action: SALT's Commentary for Easter 3", [saltproject.org](http://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](http://christiancentury.org), 4-25-22.