

FEED MY SHEEP

JOHN 21:15-17

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In today's story, the Risen Christ issues a direct challenge to Peter, the disciple who at the time of Jesus's arrest, had denied three times that he even knew Jesus. It's not surprising then that Jesus asks Peter three times whether he "loves" him. When Peter answers, "yes, I love you," Jesus urges him to "feed my sheep." Before we take a closer look at what "love" might mean in this passage and how the metaphors of sheep, shepherd, and feeding work, it is important to view this episode in the larger context of John 21.

This chapter is a bit curious because, at the end of the chapter before it, we have what seems to be a conclusion of the book: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:30-31; NRSV¹). Scholars have also noted that chapter 21 has distinctive language and style in places, leading most to think that it was added later as an appendix to an earlier version of the book. In any case, the chapter as it now stands is the book's final word.

Today's episode takes place at the end of a meal. At the beginning of chapter 21, the resurrected Jesus appears to some of his disciples sometime after his crucifixion. The account of their meeting is loaded with symbolism.

The story begins at the Sea of Galilee where the disciples are fishing. The narrative here is similar to the story in Luke 5:1-11 and may well derive from the same tradition. In the Luke story, some of the disciples, including Peter, are fishing on the Sea of Galilee and having no luck at all. Jesus gets into Peter's boat and instructs him to move into the deep water and cast his net. Peter does so and hauls in a catch so enormous that the net begins to break. Calling to their partners in another boat, they fill both boats so full that they start to sink. Amazed by the miraculous catch, Peter begs Jesus to leave, because he fears that he is unworthy to be in the presence of such a powerful and holy miracle-worker. Jesus responds: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people" (5:10). Peter will be "fishing" for other people to follow the way of Jesus, to live lives aligned with the rule of God in the world. So in Luke's story, the miraculous catch of fish symbolizes both the amazing abundance of God and the confident gospel witness disciples of Christ are called to make in the world.

In our story from John, echoes of that abundance and of church's call to share the gospel are heard in the narrator's description of yet another miraculous catch: standing on the beach, "Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.'" He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in

¹ ALL BIBLICAL QUOTES ARE FROM THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION (NRSV).

because there were so many fish” (verses 5-6). The “disciple whom Jesus loved” (i.e., John) then recognizes the stranger on the beach as Jesus. Peter jumps into the water to swim to shore, while the others row the boat, dragging the net full of fish.

Luke’s version of the story ends with the disciples abandoning their fishing nets to follow Jesus. In John’s version, the disciples join Jesus on the beach around a charcoal fire, where they roast fish and break bread. This part of the narrative resonates with the feeding of the five thousand story that appears earlier in John 6:1-14 (cf. Matt 14:13-21; Mk 6:32-44; Lk 9:10-17; also the feeding of the four thousand in Matt 15:32-39 and Mk 8:1-10), where Jesus takes five loaves and two fish and feeds a huge crowd of followers.

The feeding of the five thousand, one of the few stories that appears in all four gospels, is at its heart a story about stewardship and hospitality, about our calling as disciples of Christ to trust God’s abundance and share freely with others. The Hebrew scriptures are full of stories about hospitality offered to travelers and the vulnerable poor. From the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18) to the book of Ruth, the Bible speaks of honoring God by caring for one another, especially those who are vulnerable. In the feeding of the five thousand story, the disciples believe that they don’t have sufficient resources to meet the needs of the crowd that has come to see and hear Jesus. Their assumption of scarcity, their fear that they don’t have enough to feed the crowd trumps the ethical imperative of their Jewish faith to care for those in need. So they urge Jesus to send the crowd away to find food for themselves. Jesus responds by asking the disciples to bring what they have to the table -- five loaves of bread and two fish. When they overcome their belief that they don’t have enough, when they bring to the table everything they have and offer it to the service of others, Jesus multiplies their gifts and feeds the huge crowd. Like manna in the wilderness, the humble gifts of the people of Christ are transformed by the power of God to meet the needs of the hungry multitude, with food to spare.

In today’s story from John, Jesus takes the bread and gives it to his disciples. He then takes the fish and does likewise. The meal has a eucharistic feel to it. Verse 14 concludes with the note that “this was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.” In the breaking of bread, the disciples had experienced the very presence of the Risen Christ.

Jesus asks Peter, “do you love me?” “Yes Lord, you know that I love you!” Peter exclaims. Jesus asks a second time and a third. The parallel with Peter’s three-fold denial of Jesus (Jn 18:15-18, 25-27) is perhaps not lost on the disciple. As the narrator notes, Peter’s feelings were hurt that Jesus asked the question three times. It’s interesting but probably not significant that two different Greek words are used for “love” here. The verbs *agapao* and *phileo* sometimes carry slightly different meanings, the former referring to love based on a high regard for the inherent value of someone or something and the latter rooted more specifically in the deep feeling of affection that may arise from a personal relationship. But the two verbs seem to be used interchangeably in this passage. Their alternating use here probably has more to do with narrative style -- the desire to avoid excessive repetition -- than with any intended nuance of meaning. That Peter’s three-time affirmation recalls his earlier betrayal highlights the fact that Jesus relies on flawed, even seriously flawed people to accomplish his ongoing mission in the world.

So Peter, the betrayer of Jesus, now expresses his love for Jesus, and Jesus spells out the implication of that affirmation: “If you love me, feed my sheep!”

The shepherd-sheep metaphor runs deep in ancient Middle Eastern culture. From the time of the oldest surviving royal texts (about 2000 years before Jesus), “shepherd” is a metaphor that describes the moral

obligation of kings to care for the welfare of their subjects, especially the most vulnerable ones. The ancient Babylonian emperor Hammurabi, for example, described himself as “shepherd of the oppressed and of the slaves,” a king “who cared for the inhabitants in their need.” Today’s story uses the shepherd metaphor to cast Peter as a leader who has the responsibility of caring for the most vulnerable members of the community in his charge. Loving Jesus means caring for those in greatest need, feeding Jesus’s “sheep.”

It is important to remember that the charge to this “shepherd” of the church is given in the context of a seaside meal that recalls the themes of the miraculous catch and the feeding of the five thousand stories - - themes of abundance, generosity, faithful stewardship, evangelical witness, and communion with Christ around the table. Leading the church, caring for its needs, “feeding Jesus’s sheep,” is grounded in the church’s most basic calling and work: to live a life of faith in God, to trust in God’s abundance and not surrender to the fear of not having enough, to use God’s gifts wisely, to share them generously, to proclaim the gospel to a hurting world, and, at the table, to celebrate together the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To “feed my sheep” means to trust God and to equip the church to celebrate and promote God’s mission in the world.

The general ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) feed the sheep of Jesus by helping congregations use financial resources and facilities wisely, efficiently, and faithfully, by helping them plan for the future, by helping feed, clothe, heal, house, repair, train, educate, and create self-sustaining work for people in need, by providing secure pensions for church workers and quality health care, by promoting reconciliation in a world divided by racism and ethnic conflict, by providing emergency assistance in times of disaster, by educating leaders and ensuring that military troops and hospital patients have spiritual care, by helping new churches start and existing churches transform themselves for mission, by supporting partners around the world as together we bring the healing touch of Christ to a hurting world. In all of these ways, through our regular and special offerings to Disciples Mission Fund, we love Christ by feeding his sheep. And in this work, we meet Jesus, who is not dead but is risen indeed!

What are some of the ways your congregation “feeds the sheep” of Jesus?

How does your worship, especially your gathering at the table, connect with your calling to love Christ by feeding his sheep? What are some ways you might bring an awareness of our world-wide mission into your weekly worship?

Name some ways your congregation acts or might act out of a sense of God’s abundance rather than a fear that you don’t have enough?

How might your congregation pool resources with others to answer Jesus’s call to feed his sheep?