

“Feed My Sheep”  
Acts 10:9-23, 34-36;  
1 John 1:1-10; John 21:15-19

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I would like to start out with a little story I heard a while back. There was this fellow who was very interested in archery. He lived back in the samurai times, but instead of learning to use a sword, he wanted to be the best archer in the land. So he decided he would go study under a master, learning how to quiet his mind and be able to lock his body into place. Yet, he was frustrated because it seemed that as good as he got, he never could always hit the mark. Maybe he would misjudge the wind a little bit. There was always something that seemed to keep him from hitting the mark.

He was traveling around trying to find someone who could finally teach him how to always be dead center. As he was wandering, he came upon a barn. Stuck in the side of this barn were these arrows, and each arrow was dead-center on a target. He thought, “I found the master! I have to find who did this!”

There was a lad nearby fiddling around with his own bow and arrow. The man asked the boy, “Who did that? I’ve got to talk to him. I’ve got to learn from him.”

The young boy said, “I did that.”

He is dumbfounded. “How did you do that?”

“Here, I’ll show you.” The boy picks up his bow and arrow, shoots an arrow and *bam*, it hits the barn. There is no mark there, but the boy goes up and draws a target around the arrow.

It’s a great story. There are probably multiple ways to interpret it, but it makes me think about our own time and how, in John, we are invited to think about the idea that *if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves*. Sin means missing the mark. Sometimes it feels like, today, instead of hitting a mark we just shoot the arrow and decide to go draw the circle around it. If I don’t like the mark that’s set before me, I’ll just choose my own. Maybe there’s some thinking outside the box going on there, but on the other hand, it’s not really learning to hit the mark, is it? There’s something about deceiving ourselves if we think that if I shoot an arrow and it hits something that doesn’t matter, and then I draw the mark around it, I’ve succeeded.

I don’t know why, but when I think of sin, I often think of horseshoes because when you throw a horseshoe, you are trying to hit a mark. Oftentimes, you’re just close. In some ways, that’s a pretty trivial example. It just gives me an idea of trying to hit something besides with a bow and arrow.

Sometimes that idea of trying to hit a mark is not trivial, which always makes me think of the story of William Tell. If you know the story of William Tell, the tyrant of the

time said he would kill Tell's son unless he shot an apple off his son's head. The story goes he was able to do it. He was able to hit that mark. But there were some pretty impressive consequences to missing.

When we think about that idea of missing the mark, of sin in our lives, it's true that some of our sin and some of the things we do wrong are probably pretty trivial. On the other hand, there may be things in our lives that we are deceiving ourselves about that are not trivial. There may be ways that the wrongs we live with may be as important as hitting the apple on William Tell's son's head. I have to admit, I think of global warming a little that way. It's one of those things we live with, but we don't know how dire the consequences might be..

The interesting thing about this passage in John is that it says we have to confess our sin so that God can forgive us. The problem is that there are a lot of difficulties with confession because it admits doing something wrong. It assumes that I'm not hitting the right mark. I can't just choose any old mark and say, "I've done it." It gives me some kind of external standard I have to work toward or against, judge myself by.

If we confess, forgiveness is given. The trouble is, without confession, without thinking about what I might have done wrong or admitting that anything is wrong in my life, perhaps I'm drawing circles around arrows of my life that really aren't the things I need. We had an interesting discussion in Sunday School this morning around how we sometimes feel like we live in exile because we achieve our goals. I may have achieved the goal of buying the car I wanted, or getting the job I wanted, or traveling to the right place, or whatever other goals I might have, and find that I still don't feel satisfied. I don't feel at home. It feels like society has drawn these great targets for us, but even when we hit them, we find that it's not satisfying.

When Jesus comes to Peter, I believe what he's doing is enabling Peter to recognize his own mistakes. Jeremiah talked about that in the children's sermon this morning—how Peter had denied Jesus, betrayed Jesus three times. How it was clear that his mark at the time around that fire was simply to protect himself, and he knows as he lives on, that that was a mistake. He was aiming for the wrong mark. He hadn't stayed loyal to Jesus. I wonder if when he sees Jesus again, there might have been a little discomfort in that. It would be pretty uncomfortable to come into the presence of someone you thought was of God, and know that you have betrayed him.

Jesus goes on to invite Peter to recognize his failure and restores him. He doesn't say, "You have to live with the failure." But instead he asks, "What is it you really want? What is the mark?" Peter knows it is to love Jesus. That's what he wants to do. So Jesus says, "Okay, then feed my sheep." It's interesting that when Jesus is restoring Peter to full discipleship, he's not saying, "You've got to have the right theological thesis here for me to understand that you are accepted again." No. He says, "Do you love me? Then feed my sheep." It's a process of caring.

Peter will go on to discover that there's a lot more to feeding his sheep than he suspected. We didn't read the passage that comes a little later in Acts:

*So Peter opened his mouth and said, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."*

As Peter lives into what Jesus is inviting him to do – to feed his sheep – he discovers that the flock is large, that God shows no partiality. God doesn't care what color a person's skin is. God doesn't care what gender a person is. God doesn't care what status a person has. God doesn't care whether someone is poor or rich. God cares about human souls, about human people. So he invites Peter, as he invites us, to feed one another.

Sometimes, as we think about this passage, we will go into a discussion about the kind of love that Jesus is talking about, because Jesus says *agape*, and Peter always says *phileo*. Just a little bit of Greek: *agape* is the word for love that is most often used in the New Testament. I think it's a love that we are invited to because it's a love of choice. It's a love to choose our direction, to choose God, to choose Jesus, to choose to accept the very love God gives us. *Phileo*, on the other hand, is more like that loyalty of friends, the loyalty of a village for each other. I've always thought that Jesus was finally capitulating to what Peter was thinking about, but I thought about it a little differently this time. *Agape* is the choice to care, and really has the intention of doing. But Peter knows that what he didn't do was the doing. He wasn't able to *phileo*. He wasn't able to stay loyal. He betrayed Jesus. It's that final one, where Peter is able to hear Jesus say, "Yes, I know you're loyal. I know you are one of mine. You are restored."

It's at that point that we can recognize that Peter can move forward and begin to live out what it means to feed the pure – the lambs, to tend to those who need someone to follow – the sheep, and to feed them, and to begin to think about what it means. What does it mean to sustain pure people, the lambs? What does it mean to tend people who need someone to lead them, the sheep? My thought is we all are people who need someone to lead us at some points in our lives, and maybe all our lives.

So there is this invitation to be people who lead each other closer to God, to recognize where our sustenance is, to find in our relationships the love of God at work, and in doing that to hear Jesus' words, "Follow me." In following him, we enter into the life that is not an exile's life, but a life living into the kingdom of God with the joy of knowing that God's love and grace are among us and continuing to learn how we can tend and feed each other. Amen.