

“Tend My Sheep”
Isaiah 49:4-9; 1 Peter 4:8-11;
John 21:15-20

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This particular passage from John is not one we normally read at this time of year. We could try to make a case that since we are going into winter, we have to think about how we are going to feed the lambs. That would be kind of a stretch, and it's not really what I'm thinking about. Rather, as we look at this passage, it comes at the final time that Peter is with Jesus. This is one of those passages that I just can't take out of context because it really relates to what has happened right beforehand. So let's think back.

On the last night they were together, they had the Last Supper, instituting the communion that we now share. At that meal, Peter is listening to Jesus talk about some of the things that were going to happen, and Peter said, “I will never deny you, Lord.” Jesus looks at him and says, “Peter, you will deny me three times before the cock crows.” After that they go out to Gethsemane to pray. While they are there, the guards and rabble come and take Jesus to arrest him. At that point, Peter takes out his sword and is ready to fight. Jesus says, “No. Put away your sword.”

We assume we know what Peter might have been feeling, but I don't think he knew quite what to think at that time. Peter followed along as the guards took Jesus off to the Sanhedrin, and he went into the courtyard and was warming himself by the fire while Jesus was inside being tried. As he did that, several people asked him, “Aren't you one of those guys who follow Jesus?” and he denied it three times. After the third time, the cock crowed and he remembered what Jesus said.

Fast-forward here a little bit through the Passion, Jesus on the cross, Jesus dying. This is the point where we are in John. Peter has seen Jesus' death and he doesn't know what to do, perhaps, but go back to what he had done before. One possibility is that when Peter began all this with Jesus, he thought he had been passed over for all the rabbi schools, and then here comes a rabbi and chooses him, so he got to be part of this school that Jesus was forming. He thought he was going to become a rabbi. Maybe he learned a bit along the way, that it was a little bit more than that. Yet, his reaction here was to go back out and start fishing. Feeling like it was over, he didn't know what else to do.

So they are out fishing. Maybe he was thinking that he was back to his old profession and that was just what life was going to be for him. But as the dawn comes, they threw out their nets for the last time and catch a huge net full of fish. Just as he is pulling it in, he looks toward the shore and sees Jesus standing there. If you know anything about Peter, there's a consistent way Peter acts. Some of us call it impetuous. He immediately jumps out of the boat and starts swimming to shore so that he can see Jesus. Now, if I were Peter, I'm not sure I would have done the same thing. After denying him three times, and recognizing that, I'm not sure what the shame would have done, but I don't think I would have immediately wanted to be in Jesus' presence again. But Peter jumps and swims in, and that's where we take up this story.

Jesus has a fire going and has prepared fish and bread. It's reminiscent of the Last Supper. We don't usually name this one. Perhaps it's the First Breakfast. It is a new beginning—a new beginning for Peter, anyway. As Jesus blesses the fish and the bread, breaks it, and gives it to them, it is reminiscent of an earlier meal they had shared.

The next thing that happens is a little interesting to me. If I were Jesus, I might look at Peter and say, "Peter, isn't there something we need to talk about?" Jesus doesn't do that. Nor does Peter say to Jesus that there's something they need to talk about. It's interesting to me that Jesus just comes to Peter and asks, "Peter, do you love me?" He does that three times. It feels like it's pretty obvious that Peter denied him three times; he gets to affirm his love for Jesus three times. I'm not sure Peter gets it right then. The last time he seems a little put out—why do I have to say it again? But you can see that his denials are replaced by his affirmations.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus doesn't say, "You need to come ask for forgiveness," but instead says, "Come, let me help you again affirm who you are: a disciple, one who loves me." As I think about how Jesus comes to Peter without Peter even recognizing that he needs to do anything with Jesus, it feels like exactly what God seems to be doing with Jesus for all of us. Oftentimes it feels to me like I don't even really recognize the full extent of the need I have to be forgiven. Isn't that what God is doing in Jesus? Just as he comes to Peter and asks, "Do you love me," Jesus comes to us to let us know we are loved and to know we can love in return.

So as Jesus comes to Peter and says, "Do you love me," there's an interesting thing. Not everyone thinks it is that important, but it feels important to me that when Jesus is asking Peter "Do you love me?" says "Do you agape me," which is the Greek word for love that Jesus uses. Peter says, "Yes, I phileo you," that is, I love you but it has a different flavor. The second time Jesus comes and says, "Do you agape me?" and Peter says, "Yes, I phileo you." Jesus comes a third time and says, "Do you phileo me?" Peter says, "I phileo you." Peter seems to wonder, "Why do you keep asking?"

What's the difference? Why do I make a point of that? It's because I think the word for love is different. The agape word is about a choice; the will is involved. Do I choose to see you as one I value and therefore care about? And when I begin to care about you, I begin to care about what you care about. It's always the word God uses for loving us. Jesus asks three times. The first two, he's asking do you make the choice to see who I am, the value I bring to your life, and where that leads you, how to care about what I care about. All Peter can answer is, "I phileo you." What does that mean? It doesn't have anything to do with fish. Phileo is really an associative kind of thing. So he's saying, "Yes, I'm part of your group. I am loyal to you. You are my rabbi." But it doesn't quite get to the point of saying I have made the choice to recognize who you are and what you value, and where that leads me. It's more of fitting into the group. Do you see the difference?

The interesting thing to me is that by the end, Jesus recognizes that Peter is not going to make another choice, so even that is a moment of grace. Jesus says, "Do you phileo me," and Peter says yes, but wonders why he is asked again. Peter plays that role throughout—what's going on?—but Jesus accepts that. He reinstates Peter through the

affirmations. Sometimes it feels like forgiveness is about groveling. Here, it seems to be about affirming—to reaffirm and to be remade as a disciple of Christ.

We could stop, because this reaffirmation is a wonderful thing. We could stop, but Jesus didn't. Jesus went on. Sometimes I wonder if Peter had said, "Yes, I agape you," whether Jesus would have said the second thing, because when I say "I agape you," then I'm going to care for what you care for. What does Jesus care for? God's people. But Peter didn't say that, so Jesus had to say one more thing, "Feed my sheep." He says, "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." It sounds pretty simple. Just feed the sheep. There's a saying that every complex problem has a simple answer that is wrong. There's a converse to that. Every simple solution is really about a complex problem. It's like saying $E=mc^2$. It's easy to say, but it's hard to understand.

I think it's the same thing if we begin to think about what Jesus means when he says, "Feed my sheep." In those days you didn't have plastic buckets and pelletized feed. If they were going to feed the sheep, they would have had to take them out to the pasture, find the good grass, protect them from the elements and the animals, guide them back and forth, keep them away from the cliffs. There was a lot more to tending sheep than putting a little food in a bucket. Hearing Jesus say, "Feed my sheep," is just like the tip of an iceberg. It leads us into something much greater, deeper.

There are a lot of ways we can feed, and as Jesus' sheep, we also know there are a lot of ways we can be fed. Sometimes what we need is real food. There are people on the east coast who need real food. But there are other times we know that what we need is food for our souls, nourishment for our spirits. We need those opportunities to pray together, to worship together, to share in fellowship together, to study together. We need the feeding that happens when somebody helps us through grief. We need those times that, when we're seeing red, somebody else can help us see other colors again.

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." He's really not talking about anything different than what is being said in 1 Peter. Be stewards of the manifold grace of God. Use the gifts you are given to serve for God's sake.

It's an incredible thing that not only does Jesus want us to know the grace that we're given, but to share it, to feed his sheep, to be stewards of the manifold grace of God. That in itself is an awesome statement. Amen.

Gracious God, it is often hard for us to recognize the full set of needs we have. How grateful we are that you have come to us, that you have sent Jesus and that through Jesus we know the wonder of that thing we call grace – the surprising gift of your love – that leads us and enables us to know forgiveness. You re-call us that we might again acknowledge who you are, and not only know your love, but return it and share it. Lord, guide us. Let us be those who can feed your sheep. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.