

Feed My Sheep

John 21:9-11, 15-19

May 1, 2011

Our scripture for today is in John's gospel after the resurrection and after Jesus has appeared, twice, to his disciples. A group of those disciples – searching for something to do – decides to go fishing. After a long night, they catch nothing. Then, at daybreak, the disciples see someone on the beach who tells them to cast their nets again. They are filled to overflowing. It turns out, that stranger, again, is Jesus. The passage picks up after Peter, in his excitement of recognizing Jesus, jumps out of the boat to swim ashore. The rest of the disciples take the boat. Listen with me for God's word...

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When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught."

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."

He said to him a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fashion your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

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Welcome to National Associate Pastor Sunday. At least everywhere else besides here. At my first church I was an associate pastor and so I know a thing or two about preaching the Sunday after Easter. I told Bryan and Sarah that I thought I'd preach today...for old time's sake.

Ah, the Easter glow. What a good feeling. Jesus is raised. The church is full. The lilies are lovely. The brass is brassy. The Sunday lunch is perfectly executed. *Lawd! What a morning!*

Now, it's a week later.

After the glow of Easter morning, the disciples did what it seems like others around here may have done this Sunday, they went fishing. For the disciples, fishing meant resuming their normal lives. At the beginning of their journey with him, Jesus told them to drop their nets and follow. But now that Jesus was gone, they felt like they might as well pick those nets back up again.

At least that's what Peter – the ringleader of this fishing expedition - thought.

At the end of the passage we heard this morning, Jesus and Peter have a remarkable exchange. You remember that not too long ago, Peter denied Jesus three times, just as Jesus said he would. This exchange is about redemption. Three times, Jesus asks Peter : “Do you love me?” Three times Peter responds, “Yes, Lord. You know I love you!”

But, since it is after Easter, loving Jesus isn't enough. Jesus wants more than that. So three times, Jesus says: “then feed my sheep.”

It seems the Easter glow is not for basking, after all. It is for living like we believe things are different – and it is about reflecting the love we have for Christ by the ways we tend and feed one another.

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About six years ago, I heard someone preach a sermon on this scripture at my sister's ordination service. Meg is an associate pastor at a Presbyterian Church in Kansas City. Come to think of it, I bet she is preaching this Sunday...

The preacher that afternoon was a woman named Frances Taylor Gench. Frances is a New Testament professor at Union Seminary in Richmond, where Meg attended school. Frances looks like what you would think a smart, well-mannered, polite, Virginia professor would look like. She is rather petite, with a pretty face and a sweet smile.

When she began to read the text we just heard from John, you could almost hear the congregation full of my sister's soon-to-be parishioners ooh and ahh. They were the sheep! This was going to be a sermon about how Meg's new job as a pastor was to love up on them.

Then Frances started to preach. Indeed, it was a sermon about the privilege and responsibility of ministry. But near the end of her sermon, when she got to the part about feeding the sheep, Frances made an observation that no one was expecting.

“You’ll notice,” she began...so politely... “you’ll notice that nowhere does Jesus say that Peter should love the sheep. No, it is quite clear. In succession, Jesus says, ‘Feed my lambs,’ ‘Tend my sheep,’ ‘Feed my sheep.’ Meg, it is not the love of the sheep that sustains the work of ministry. In fact, it cannot. Because sheep will disappoint you. They are messy. They don’t follow directions. They get out of the gate. What will sustain you in the work of ministry is not your love of the sheep, but your love for Jesus. That is the message that Peter received.”

It got really quiet after that, while folks in the congregation realized what Frances had just said about them.

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I have a guess that one of the reasons why it is so difficult for us to stay focused in our effort to be the Easter people we know we should be is because we think it supposed to be easy. Jesus’ words to Peter suggest that if we are counting on the sheep for our motivation, we are looking in the wrong place in order to have energy to be Christ’s hands in the world.

The sheep inside our own congregation are one thing, but what about the other sheep...the one’s “outside of the fold” that Jesus talked about earlier in John’s gospel? After all, Christ died and was raised not just for us, but for the world. And it is into that world that we are sent – to tend, to feed.

Maybe I am the only one who has ever felt that good-old-Presbyterian guilt about not always enjoying the day-to-day experience of feeding Christ's sheep.

But I doubt it.

Back when I was an associate pastor, the church I served had a feeding ministry to the homeless and working poor each Monday morning of the year. I was in charge of organizing the ministry. We fed about 150 people each week.

At first, I was excited about the chance to roll up my sleeves and help the church do ministry with the kinds of people that Jesus paid attention to: the downtrodden, the neglected, those on the margins.

It turns out, ministry with those kinds of people is hard! I remember, about a year into it, when I would start waking up on Monday morning with dread in the pit of my stomach. The fact is, I was annoyed by the people we served. I was tired of them. And it was little things: I began to resent the fact that having all 150 of those folks in the church every week left a smell – a kind of dirty, cigarette-drenched smell of the street. It is a smell I will never forget.

Do you know that those people – Jesus' sheep that we fed – were not always grateful for their meal? Some of them were downright rude. Sometimes they would get in fights that I would have to break-up. Sometimes they would yell at our volunteers if we refused them second-helpings. And the futility! I remember being amazed that after five years of Mondays, almost 75% of the guests we served were the same group that I had met five years before. It is not easy feeding sheep.

That's my experience. What about yours? What about members of our flock here at 900 Jordan Street. We do a pretty good job of taking care of one another; tending to one another; feeding one another. But, be truthful, does anyone else in the church drive you crazy? Maybe make you a little mad? Are there people who you find it hard to be with, or talk to, or love?

Of course there are. Maybe, even some of them are (or have been) your pastors!

So it is good thing that Jesus doesn't expect us to enjoy the work of ministry all the time. It is a good thing that our energy and motivation and passion do not depend on the people we tend to, and feed, and teach, and support being loveable and easy to be around. Because many times they are not. And God knows it.

That is why it is so important that every once in a while we are reminded of the fact that what motivates us to do the work of gospel ministry; to engage with the world around us that needs to be healed, and comforted, and shaped into the vision of what God desires; it is not the sheep, but the shepherd – who gave all that he had in order to demonstrate just how important we are to him.

Indeed, our motivation for the hard work of being Easter people is found in the One who stood on the shoreline, with a charcoal fire, and offered those who followed him a meal to nourish their work of discipleship.

It is for that reason that we gather here – around this table – and share this meal. So that we can renew our love for Christ, and be fed, in order that we will go from this place to feed the world and one another.