

Love Me – Feed My Sheep

John 21:1-19

Our Gospel lesson today starts with the words, "After these things." After what things? Since this is the second Sunday after Easter, it is referring to after the crucifixion and resurrection! Additionally, it also is referring to after his first appearances to the disciples!

Those things took place in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is often called the Holy City, and there's a sense in which that's true — but it's also true that most of Jesus' ministry took place in Galilee — not in the big city, but in the small towns — in the sticks. Galilee is where people responded most favorably to Jesus. Jerusalem, the big city, is where Jesus' enemies lived. Jerusalem is where they killed him.

So "after these things" that took place in Jerusalem, the disciples went back home to Galilee — to the place where Jesus had healed and taught and had drawn great crowds.

When the disciples went back to Galilee, they went fishing. It wasn't sports fishing! It was business fishing! They were fishermen — that's what they did for a living — that's how they got their food. But on this occasion, nothing was biting. Or, to be more exact, nothing was swimming into their nets.

But then several remarkable things happened. A stranger appeared on shore, and said, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" I don't know if you've ever spent any time around professional fishermen, but they tend to be pretty rugged. The first remarkable thing that happens here is that this stranger calls these fishermen "Children" and they let him get away with it. There's a possibility that the Greek word translated "Children" here could be translated "Guys." That would probably go down better with a bunch of fishermen.

At any rate, they answer, "No." They aren't catching anything.

So the stranger says, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So the next remarkable thing that happens here is that the fishermen don't tell the stranger to go jump in the lake.

No, they haul in their nets and toss them over the right side of the boat. Perhaps they think the stranger has seen a school of fish under the water.

At any rate, when they do what the stranger tells them to do, they catch so many fish — one hundred fifty three big ones to be exact — that they can't even haul in the net.

That was when one of the disciples recognized the stranger. "It is the Lord!" he shouted. "It is the Lord." At that, Peter jumped into the lake — to swim to Jesus, I suppose. You never knew what Peter would do next.

Once the fishermen got to shore, Jesus had a charcoal fire ready to broil some fish. The only other time a charcoal fire was mentioned in this Gospel, it was when Peter was denying Jesus. (John

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18.18) Peter was standing by a charcoal fire when he denied Jesus. Now Jesus, by another charcoal fire, is going to give Peter a chance to redeem himself.

Jesus and the disciples broiled some fish and ate some breakfast. Then Jesus singled out Peter and asked, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" In other words, "Do you love me more than these other disciples?" "Do you love me most of all?"

Peter responded, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." That was true. Jesus did know that Peter loved him.

So Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Then he asked the question again, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter said again, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

So Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." And then Jesus asked again, "Do you love me?"

And Peter responded, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

And in that little exchange between Jesus and Peter, we can find everything we need to know about what it means to be a Christian.

First, we can learn from the question that Jesus asked — "Do you love me?" Jesus could have asked any number of questions. He could have asked, "Did you remain faithful?" — but he didn't. He could have asked, "Did you deny me?" — but he didn't. He could have asked, "Did you run away?" — but he didn't. Jesus asked three questions, but they really boil down to one: "Do you love me?"

I find that wonderfully encouraging. Jesus was catching Peter at his low point. Peter had denied Jesus three times. He had run away. He had lost faith. He felt terrible.

But Jesus didn't rake Peter over the coals. He didn't criticize him for his failure. He asked only one question: "Do you love me?"

The reason that I find this so encouraging is that I, too, have failed Jesus. And I imagine that you have as well. If Jesus wanted to air our sins in public, we would be terribly embarrassed. If Jesus demanded a clean and pure life from us, we would be hopelessly lost.

But Jesus doesn't ask, "What have you done?" He doesn't ask, "Have you been good?" He doesn't ask for a list of our accomplishments. He doesn't ask how many commandments we have violated. He asks only, "Do you love me?"

I find that encouraging, because I can do that. I can love Jesus. I am not sure how well I've done the rest of it, but I love Jesus. If that's the only test that I have to pass, I can pass it.

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And so can you. You can pass the test too — because you can love Jesus.

If Jesus required us to be truly holy — or to serve in high church office — or to read the Bible every day — or to never to have an impure thought — or to never to have violated the commandments — if Jesus required those things, we would be lost. But Jesus asks only, "Do you love me?" We can do that.

When Peter answered that he loved Jesus, Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." Lambs are baby sheep — adolescent sheep — sheep that aren't yet fully grown — sheep that need special care and feeding — sheep that need someone to teach them how to grow up right. Lambs need someone to keep them from running out in front of a car. They need someone to make sure that they eat right and get enough sleep.

If we love Jesus, we will do what we can to feed his lambs. We will do what we can to love and protect and feed and teach the children in our care.

We try to do that at this church. We love our children, and provide a Sunday school where they can learn about Jesus.

Jesus is speaking to us when he says, "Feed my lambs." He is speaking to you. Give some thought to how you might answer that call — how you might contribute to the well-being of the children and youth of this congregation — of this community. Ask yourself how you might become a blessing to children in other parts of the world who are desperately needy. Jesus says, "Feed my lambs."

Then Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." Tend is a bigger word than feed — every gardener knows that. It is easy to feed a garden — all you have to do is to sprinkle some fertilizer on the ground. Tending the garden is the hard part. Tending the garden means getting your hands dirty. Tending the garden means hoeing weeds. Tending the garden means building a fence to keep out the deer and rabbits. Tending the garden is hard work, in part because it requires the gardener to anticipate what the plants need — and then to provide it.

Jesus says, "Tend my sheep." Ask yourself what that means for you. Ask yourself what you could be doing to help other people — whether children or adults. There are plenty of needy people in this world — in this town — in this congregation — in your neighborhood. What does Jesus want you to do to help them?

And finally, Jesus told Peter, "Feed my sheep." Jesus himself provides the model here. He fed people bread and fish at the feeding of the five thousand. He gave them food for their bodies. He fed people bread and wine at the Last Supper. He gave them food for their souls. In other words, Jesus fed people to meet their physical needs, and he fed them to meet their spiritual needs.

Jesus calls us to do both. Ask yourself what he might want you to do to feed your hungry brother or sister — to give them physical bread. And ask yourself how he might be calling you to nurture people spiritually — to give them spiritual bread.

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Rick Richardson tells a story that illustrates what I'm talking about. His friend, Sam, lost his wallet, so Rick said, "Sam, I'll pray for you." Sam said, "I guess it can't hurt."

But then a little later, Sam came over to tell Rick that he had found his wallet. He laughed, "Hey, you can pray for me anytime."

A few days later, Sam mentioned that his ulcer was acting up. Rick asked if there was anything he could do, and Sam asked him to pick up some medicine. Rick delivered the medicine, and told Sam that he would pray for him. Sam seemed happy enough for him to do that.

And then Sam reported that he was feeling better and didn't need the medicine. Rick said, "Man, I wish I had prayed for you before I went and bought that medicine" — and they both laughed.

And now, whenever Sam needs something, he asks Rick to pray for him.

Love Jesus — and feed his sheep.