

John 21:15–17 (NRSV)

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 the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the 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.

Feed My Sheep

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: April 10, 2016 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: John 21:15-17

I thought I should do something a little different for today's sermon. After all, it is such a special occasion to celebrate so many years together. I first thought I might be bold and do what no minister should ever do: take on the part of Jesus. I could say, "Tom, I'll be leaving soon. You'll be in charge. Feed my sheep." But some of you have known me for as many as thirty-five years, and some members of my family have known me for much longer, and I believe there is clear consensus. I will never be mistaken for Jesus. And more important, you are not my sheep. To whatever extent I have been your shepherd, you are God's sheep, not mine.

So I put that idea aside and thought instead I might tell stories, memories from our third of a century together. That was tempting and maybe there will be a time to do something like that one day. It would be a lot of fun. But finally I realized the only thing I'm really qualified to do on a Sunday morning is to preach our sacred texts as best I can. And I satisfy myself with the idea that these great texts always want to point us to where we've been, where we stand, and to where we may go. It seems just right to attend to these venerable texts today as we stand at this moment and take account of what has been and gesture to what may be.

So, turning to our story, I want to take us back a few days before it, back toward the end of Holy Week. It is nighttime, the night when Jesus was betrayed and arrested. At the high altitude of Jerusalem it is the usual chilly evening. But Jesus' arrest has drawn a crowd, and in the midst of such excitement few have gone home to shelter and warmth. In the courtyard the slaves and the police have made a charcoal fire. They stand, waiting, watching, and warming their hands. Outside the courtyard, peering in, is Simon Peter, curious and chilled in body and soul. Finally Peter finally approaches the entrance of the courtyard. The slave girl who is watching the door says, "You are not one of his disciples are you?" Peter responds with a simple denial, "No, I am not." The man who had said he would throw his life down in loyalty to Jesus, sells him out to warm his hands at a fire.

Once inside, Peter is warming his hands by the charcoal fire even as Jesus is being brutally questioned. The group around the fire asks Peter, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" And again, Peter says, "No, I am not." But another one says, "Didn't I see you in the garden, when they arrested him?" Warming his hands over the charcoal, Peter says a third time, "No, that wasn't me." And then the cock crowed, satisfying Jesus' prediction: You will deny me three times before the cock crows. Standing there, with his hands over the fire, Peter clenches as a chill move up his spine.

And now let us move forward several days. Where we are going is beyond Easter. It is after that day when Thomas doubted and then believed. It is up in the Galilee, Jesus' old stomping grounds. The disciples are fishing. They've returned to their old lives. Again it is night, night just before the dawn. But all night they have caught nothing. At daybreak Jesus comes upon them. [Slide 1] He stands on the rocks by the sea. This spot on the western edge of the Sea of Galilee is said to mark the spot. The well-worn steps he would have taken down to the shore. [Slide 2] Today pilgrims place prayers in the crannies of the basalt. And a simple church reveres

the location. [Slide3] Jesus calls out to the disciples knowing their fishing has been in vain. He instructs them to throw their nets out the other side of the boat. When they do, the fish are so plentiful, that the nets are too heavy with fish to bring in. Once again the disciples have been looking in the wrong place. And once again Jesus turns a scarcity of fish into an abundant meal. Two interesting echoes of Jesus' ministry among them.

But now things turn even more interesting. When the disciples come ashore in the cool Galilean pre-dawn, there is another charcoal fire awaiting them. Unlike the one a few days ago, it is not a charcoal fire in the official courtyard, and it is not a fire to warm the hands of spectators at a spectacle. This time the fire is on the lakeshore, and it is for cooking fish and bread. Jesus again feeds the disciples. He makes them breakfast. One fire, a few days ago, is to warm the hands of the voyeuristic crowd as it loses its soul; another fire, today, its opposite, for at today's fire Jesus feeds the body and restores the soul.

They share a meal together. And then, after they have eaten, as they sit soaking in the warmth of the charcoal, Jesus addresses a series of questions to Peter, questions that parallel those Peter had been asked by that other charcoal fire, in the courtyard a few days ago. In a real sense Peter gets another chance at the answers. In the previous scene Peter had just hours before promised to die for Jesus, but when the chips were down, Peter denied he even knew Jesus. Now, again warming before a fire, Peter is presented with a similar set of questions. The slave girl in the courtyard had asked, "You aren't one of his disciples, are you?" Peter had said, "No, I am not."

Jesus himself now asks him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" There's a bit of a trap here. Peter had previously boasted that he would love Jesus better than anybody. Now when Jesus echoes that brag, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Peter drops the swagger and simply says, "Yes, I love you." Jesus responds, "Feed my lambs." A second time Jesus asks, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Again the answer is yes. And Jesus says, "Tend my sheep." And then a third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Again yes. And finally Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep." Three times Peter has affirmed his love for Jesus, each time reversing the curse of his three-fold denial in the courtyard. In a grove next to the little church on the Sea of Galilee is a sculpture that commemorates Peter's restoration. [Slide 4] Peter is rehabilitated, and it is a great story of hope for all of us, all of us who so often need to be rehabilitated for the ways in which we, also, turn our backs on Jesus, even when we have had the best of intentions. Peter was not just forgiven, but he was restored to his former position of trust; it is a story of the full measure of grace and mercy that God grants all of us. If that were all there was to the story, it would be worth the price of admission.

But that's not all there is. Jesus does not just restore Peter, he commissions him to ministry. Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep. Jesus tells Peter to be a shepherd to his, Jesus's, sheep. Now, shepherds in the Bible are a mixed bag, and it has become somewhat fashionable to point out just how rough and rude they must have been. After all, they worked long hours for poor wages caring for animals that were forever getting themselves in trouble. The probably didn't smell very good. Frederick Buechner's piece that we often read at the Christmas Eve service does as good a job as any I know of describing such shepherds: coarse and loud even as they present themselves to the Christ child.

Earlier in the Gospel of John there is a passage that may help us understand the two sides of the shepherds. In chapter 10, Jesus says that he is the good shepherd, the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. And Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the kind of shepherd

who is in just as a job, the shepherd who has no vested interest in the sheep. Jesus says this latter kind of shepherd sees the wolf coming, and he runs and leaves the sheep.

Peter first acted like a shepherd who leaves the sheep. When the mob came that fateful night, Peter ran and fled, while the wolves snatched Jesus. But this is a new day. Peter has repented, and Jesus has restored him to trust. Once again he is given responsibilities, the responsibilities of being a good shepherd, this time to Jesus's sheep. Peter is to be a good shepherd of the church.

Just after this morning's passage come a surprising couple of verses in which Jesus predicts Peter's death. Jesus predicts that Peter will lay down his life for the sheep, for the church. Tradition has it that, indeed, Peter was a martyr for the church, crucified upside down in Rome. In this couple of curious verses, Jesus predicts Peter's martyrdom, and then, given that fact, offers a rather uninviting invitation. After Jesus predicts that Peter will die a martyr, Jesus says to Peter, "Follow me." It could not be clearer that Peter's discipleship will enormously cost; it will cost him his life.

Following Jesus doesn't always cost you your physical life, but Jesus does warn all of us that only in losing our lives in some sense will we actually experience the true life he offers. So, following Jesus is not an inconsequential choice. Following a spiritual path of any kind never is an inconsequential choice. Jesus has called him to be a shepherd, a good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

There are two important features in this special calling. First, the definition of discipleship, the definition of what it means to follow Jesus is to care for God's children, Jesus' sheep. Three times Jesus says, "Peter, son of John, do you love me?" And every time that Peter says yes, Jesus says to him, care for my sheep. It sounds simple, maybe even simple-minded, but the heart of the Christian message is love and caring. Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.

But like so many things that sound simple, this admonition is anything but. For Peter does not own the sheep. Remember the good shepherd owns the sheep. On the surface Peter has no vested interest in them. These are Jesus' sheep, not Peter's. Feed my sheep, Jesus says, not, feed your sheep. Jesus calls Peter to care for the sheep as if they were his.

Left to our own devices, we care especially for our own. Sometimes we care especially for our own family, and that is a good thing, to a degree. But often enough we take it too far. We care especially for our own family, our own community, our own race, our own sexual orientation, our own nation, our own socioeconomic, religious or cultural group, and we fail in our care for those who are not our own. Regrettably, sometimes we hate those who are not our own.

And that is the barrier that Jesus seeks to help us knock down. Jesus said, if you love me, Peter, feed my sheep. We don't know what Peter thought about the job at first, but I'm willing to believe that he found it hard, hot, dirty, dangerous and stinky work. After all, he was a fisherman by trade, not a sheep-feeding disciple. In short, I'm willing to bet that at first Peter became a good shepherd because he was doing it for Jesus, that he became a good shepherd because he loved Jesus, that he became a good shepherd because he was being obedient and loyal. But I am also willing to bet that by the time Peter met his death, by the time he laid down his life for Jesus' sheep, Peter had come to love the sheep, as well.

Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep. That is the ministry that Jesus gives to all of us. It requires us to leave our fears, and our likes and dislikes behind. It requires us to reach outside our doors and walls, to meet people where they are and who they are, and to love them. We are called to do it, not because it is what we are inclined to do, but because it is what Jesus

has commanded us to do. But sure enough true love grows; we love the sheep as if they were our own. Can you hear his voice still calling? Lose your life that you may gain it. Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep. Amen.