

“Feed My Sheep”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
May 1, 2022

Friends in Christ....

Today is the Third Sunday of Easter. It is two weeks after the resurrection. Our Gospel text comes from the 21st chapter of John which is thought to be an epilogue to tie up loose ends. It takes place at the Sea of Galilee where Jesus appears to disciples, and has an exchange with Peter, asking Peter if he loves Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. We will hear more about that shortly.

For those who follow the Revised Common Lectionary, there is usually an Old Testament lesson. The exception is the time between Easter and Pentecost when stories come from the book of Acts with the intent of showing the trajectory of Easter. Acts tells us about what happened to and in the early church.

The risen Christ had told his disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. A seemingly impossible task considering how few apostles there were, and how ill equipped they were. They were to begin in Jerusalem and spread out from there, and they had success. Then, because of the persecution of followers of Jesus, believers left Jerusalem and scattered far and wide. Some followers moved to Syria and settled in Damascus. Saul was a zealous Pharisee who was attempting to stamp out this heresy. He got approval to go to Damascus to search for followers of Jesus and to arrest them. On the way, his life is changed forever. From Acts chapter 9, beginning with the first verse.

Acts Lesson Acts 9:1-6 (CEB)
Saul Encounters the Risen Jesus

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still spewing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest, ²seeking letters to the synagogues in Damascus. If he found persons who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, these letters would authorize him to take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³During the journey, as he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven encircled him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice asking him, “Saul, Saul, why are you harassing me?”

⁵Saul asked, “Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus, whom you are harassing,” came the reply. ⁶“Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do.”

It is a dramatic story. Amy Oden writes: “A villain struck down by a flash of light. Jesus’ disembodied voice calling him out. We tend to assume that Saul is the bad guy in the story. But is he? It is important to remember that Saul sees himself as the good guy trying to protect the faith. Saul loves God and wants to stamp out anything that, in his view, dishonors God. In this case, which meant the Jews in the movement around Jesus.

When he breathes “threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (verse 1) Saul is God’s champion going after “bad Jews.” He sees Jesus’ followers as those within his own faith needing rescue from their error. He asks for letters to the synagogues in Damascus that will give

him authority to conduct his policing there, to clean up his own faith community and rid it of the straying, unrighteous ones. As far as he is concerned, this is not a matter of going after people just to persecute them, but rather a correction of “Jews gone bad.”

Saul is the classic example of the devout person who is so determined to do good that they are blinded (literally!) to the destructive consequences of their purity campaign. He does much harm as he is trying to do good.

We must be careful, then, in how we portray Saul. Rather than portraying him as a persecutor, we might see him as a committed son of the covenant, someone trying to do the right thing in order to strengthen the people of God.

His one-track focus on righteousness narrows rather than expands his vision of what God is up to. He is so convinced of the error of others that he cannot see the new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ and mis-reads it completely.

Then Jesus dramatically came into his life. Saul was led by those accompanying him to Damascus. When there, God spoke to a man named Ananias to go to Saul. Of course, he was reluctant to do so knowing what Saul was up to. However, he obeyed God and went to Saul, prayed over him, and the blindness was no more. Amazingly, Saul went to the temple and proclaimed the risen Christ.

In later years, with his name changed to Paul, he could not talk enough about what he often referred to as “the mystery of grace.” It is the gospel truth that God saves people not according to their merits, not because of their background, piety, skin color, ethnicity, or high moral standards but just by grace alone and against the odds.

As we turn to John’s gospel, some things needed to be cleared up. When we last saw Peter, he had denied Jesus three times. Other disciples had run away and into hiding. How do they get back into good graces with Jesus? Jesus had sent a message to return to Galilee. Note: The Sea of Tiberias is another name for the Sea of Galilee. Then Jesus appeared. From the 21st chapter of John’s gospel:

Gospel: John 21:1-19 (CEB)

Jesus Appears Again to the Disciples

21 Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. This is how it happened: ²Simon Peter, Thomas (also called Didymus or the Twin), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee’s sons, and two other disciples were together. ³Simon Peter told them, “I am going fishing.”

They said, “We will go with you.” They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. ⁴Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize it was Jesus.

⁵Jesus called to them, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?”

They answered him, “No.”

⁶He said, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.”

So they did, and there were so many fish that they could not haul in the net. ⁷Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the

water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, only about one hundred yards.

⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” ¹¹ Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net had not torn, even with so many fish. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus and Peter

¹⁵ When they finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?”

Simon replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ Jesus asked a second time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Simon replied, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you.”

Jesus said to him, “Take care of my sheep.” ¹⁷ He asked a third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was sad that Jesus asked him a third time, “Do you love me?” He replied, “Lord, you know everything; you know I love you.”

Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. ¹⁸ I assure you that when you were younger you tied your own belt and walked around wherever you wanted. When you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and another will tie your belt and lead you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹ He said this to show the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. After saying this, Jesus said to Peter, “Follow me.”

May God bless our hearing of his Holy Word. Amen.

There is a lot in those verses to unpack. Jesus is alive. The first verses are about fishing. This is reminiscent of the calling of Peter from Luke 5 where Jesus tells them to go out again after a night of not catching anything to having a large catch and they follow Jesus. You wonder if the disciples were uncertain about their future. Does following Jesus continue, or do they go back to their previous lives? For several of them, it was fishing. We can understand Peter wanting to go fishing, what that was what he did for a living before Jesus came into his life. Some sense of normalcy was needed after what had happened in Jerusalem. After fishing all night and catching nothing, Jesus shows up and tells them to put the nets out on the other side of the boat and they had a catch of a lifetime. One hundred fifty-three large fish were caught. The number of fish must have been symbolic of something, but no one today knows what it refers to. The disciples end up having breakfast with Jesus. John makes a point that Jesus ate with the disciples, which would mean that he was not a ghost for ghosts do not eat. Then he takes Peter aside and has a conversation with him.

Often when people look at this dialogue, they focus on the word love.

Instead, I want to look briefly at Jesus’ responses after Peter says that he loves Jesus. He says ...

“Feed my lambs.”

“Take care of my sheep.”

“Feed my sheep.”

Peter is being commissioned to tend the flock, but as its keeper rather than owner.

Maybe it is because of my growing up on a dairy farm, I have a little different perspective. While they are referring to sheep, it holds true for most animals.

“Feed my lambs” – a new-born first needs its mother’s milk and then it transitions to dry feed that promotes growth.

“Take care of my sheep” – they are in a period of growth as they mature.

“Feed my sheep” – this is taking care of them at maturity. They need a maintenance ration.

When we talk about faith for believers, it grows in stages just like in animal husbandry.

Brian Stoffregen in his Exegetical notes writes about these stages using the disciple Thomas as an example.

(1) EXPERIENCED FAITH (preschool & early childhood) – it is imitating actions, e.g., a child praying the Lord's Prayer without understanding the meaning of all the words -- "This is what **we** do. This is how **we** act."

(2) AFFILIATIVE FAITH (childhood & early adolescent years) – it is belonging to a group, which still centers on imitating what the group does -- "This is what **we** believe and do. This is **our** group/church."

(3) SEARCHING FAITH (late adolescence) – is asking questions, "Is this what **I** believe?" Thomas is our example of this. He will not blindly accept what the others have said, but needs to find certainty for himself. This stage of faith is adding the "head" to the "heart" of the earlier stages.

In spite of his questions, Thomas remained with the disciples. There he discovered the answers to his questions.

(4) OWNED FAITH (early adulthood) -- this stage comes only through the searching stage. After exploring the question, "Is this what **I** believe?" one, hopefully, discovers a Christian answer that declares: "This is what **I** believe." For example, the Thomas scene ends with such a personal confession: "My Lord and my God" -- a confession we don't hear from any of the other disciples who did not go through the same questioning as Thomas. However, this is the strong, personal faith that one witnesses to, and one is willing to die for -- the other disciples certainly ended up in this stage.

Each one of us is on our own faith journey. Others feed us spiritually, and we, in turn, feed others. We can take Jesus’ command to Peter to “Feed my sheep” as a command to us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.