

Feed My Sheep
A Sermon on John 21:1-19 by The Rev. Philip Major
Part Two of a Five Part Easter Series
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ May 1, 2022

During this Easter Season you and I are looking forward to a time of sabbath, a time of rest and reflection. Somewhere around the end of May I trust you will begin a time of reflection as a member of one of our sabbatical small groups. Yesterday, fourteen leaders finished their second day of preparation to lead these sabbatical small groups. Every active adult member is invited to participate in one of the groups. Though we have tried to include everyone on our list of members, I am sure we have made some mistakes. If you don't receive a phone call or other invitation to join a group, please contact me or one of our wardens. We will make sure you are included. Our goal is for every active adult member to participate.

I am preparing for my own sabbatical time, which begins Tuesday, May 24th. Between now and May 24th, one important task for me is to leave you with some basic ideas about our faith journey. I want to leave you with the fundamental ideas about being a disciple of Jesus in preparation for this time of rest and reflection. These five ideas are derived in part from the stories about Jesus and his disciples we are reading from the Gospel of John during this Easter Season.

Today's story is fascinating on several fronts. The first interesting idea is that the Gospel of John appeared to come to an end in the verse that precedes this story, at the end of chapter 20. At some point in the first years of the telling of the story of the Gospel, this chapter was added as a sort of epilogue. An epilogue can be an important part of the story, and this true about chapter 21; it is an extra chapter which adds much to the original story.

There are other interesting, almost comical parts to the story. Being comical does not mean they aren't truthful and important. Consider the verse where Peter is sitting naked in the boat. Then John tells him that the guy they have been talking with on the shore is actually the Lord, so Peter puts on some clothes and jumps into the water. Peter swims to shore because there is an urgent need; he doesn't want to wait for the boat, loaded to the brim with fish to slowly get dragged back onto the shore.

Then the disciples and Jesus come to the charcoal fire, which very conveniently has fish and bread on it. Jesus invites them to have breakfast with him. This is important because ghosts aren't very good at eating breakfast, or eating any other food for that matter. This is more proof to the disciples that the person in front of them is indeed not a ghost. Then Jesus took the bread and gave it to them, and he did the same with the fish. This is more or less a campfire version of the last supper. Jesus and his disciples are sharing communion again.

In the middle of the story we get to the place where the narrator remarks, "None of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?'" Thematically this is important. From the very first chapter the overarching question of the Gospel of John is, "Who is this person? Who is Jesus, and what is he?" Throughout the Gospel, Jesus answers the question with a variety of statements. I am the bread of life. I am the good shepherd. I am the gate for the sheep. I am the true vine. I am the way, the truth and the life. Each of these responses hearkens back to Exodus 3, where God tells Moses to tell the Israelites, "'I am' has sent me to you." "I am" is the name of God. None of the disciples dared to ask Jesus, 'Who are you?', but by this point in the Gospel we have a very good idea of who Christ Jesus is.

For me, the important part of the story begins after the breakfast. Here we have an extended conversation between Jesus and Simon Peter. Consider that Simon Peter is seen as the leader of the group of the twelve disciples. Simon Peter is the one Mary Magdalene went to when she discovered the stone, rolled away from the tomb on Easter morning. Simon Peter was the first of the disciples to enter the empty tomb. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus goes so far as to say to him, "You are Peter. On this

rock I will build my church.” Simon Peter promises to never forsake Jesus in his hour of need, but in his hour of weakness he denies knowing Jesus three times.

So it is significant that Jesus asks Simon Peter the same question three times, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Notice the text says, “Peter felt hurt because Jesus said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’” This is remarkable on several fronts. It is remarkable because I cannot think of any other time in all of Holy Scripture, or in any other ancient text, where we read of someone experiencing this feeling of being emotionally hurt. This is an expression of deep personal vulnerability.

People express their feelings of deep personal vulnerability much more often today. One hundred years ago it was quite uncommon, especially for leaders and especially for men. Two thousand years ago the culture surrounding Jesus and his disciples was built on shame and honor. It was never acceptable for a man, certainly not for a leader, to express vulnerability, the feeling of being emotionally hurt. Of course, Mark, Matthew and Luke give us the most dramatic examples of personal vulnerability in the story of the trial and crucifixion of Christ Jesus.

This is the first big takeaway from this story; in the community of disciples the vulnerabilities of each member are accepted. In the community founded in the love of Christ members are not expected to always be brave and strong. We are members of a community where we are permitted to express our full humanity, including our vulnerability.

But the biggest takeaway is found in Jesus’ responses to Simon Peter when Peter says, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” The first time Jesus says, “Feed my lambs.” The second time Jesus says, “Tend my sheep.” The third time Jesus says, “Feed my sheep.” I’m sure someone has spent hundreds of pages detailing the different implications of these three statements, but the point is that there is just one, vital message. Jesus tells Simon Peter to feed the flock.

We are called to feed the flock. We are called to be members of a community where we will be fed. We are called to live in a community where the primary job of the leaders is to feed the flock.

This is why we are here. We are here because we need to be fed with food that truly sustains us. We are here because we have responded to God’s call to feed others. We are here to be fed and to feed others as part of the blessed community of disciples.

What will feed you? What is it we are hungry for?

We are hungry to be in a community of trust. We are hungry for meaning. We are hungry for beauty. We are hungry for the chance to create something new. We are hungry to tell our stories. We are hungry to be listened to. We are hungry for fellowship. We are hungry to have the story of our lives be a story of hope.

In real life, this looks like people making soup for Wednesday Lunch. In real life this looks like choir rehearsal. In real life this looks like First Friday Dinners. Living in a community where people are fed looks like feminist theology. It looks like coffee hour, also known as community fellowship time. Living in a community of hope looks like people filling up the *Open Pantry*. It looks like the people of St. Paul’s welcoming and serving friends and strangers who are in a place of need.

Last week I said the first rule for disciples of Jesus is to build relationships of trust. This week we see the second rule. We are called to feed the flock. We are called to build communities that feed people. We are called to be part of communities where we are fed with the stuff that truly sustains us.