

3 Easter John 21:1-19
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When I was in my 30's, I began to discern a call to ordained ministry. I was immersed in the life of my parish and my rector and several friends encouraged me to explore the idea. I had 153 reasons why it was not a good time, why I did not have the skills required, and why I was not ready. If you have ever had the experience of saying no or even not yet to God about something, then you know that it just gets more and more difficult, and that the promptings of the Spirit become irresistible. Eventually I made the decision to set aside a day to be still with God and sort this all out. I sat in silence, I prayed, and then I opened my Bible.

I chose the Gospel of John because our Bible study had read and studied it, and I had fallen in love with it. For reasons not known to me then, I turned to chapter 21, to the very passage we just heard read today, and as I read it I became very aware in the moment that God was speaking directly to me through the story. It took me some time, but finally I recognized Jesus calling me to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, feed his sheep. In that moment of awareness I said yes to God, though I was not sure then what feeding and tending would look like for me in exploring this call. Even after saying yes, I needed to keep looking for Jesus and recognizing him along the journey. Recognizing Jesus in our lives is not always easy, and your call to feed the sheep will look different than mine.

So here we see that the disciples still don't recognize Jesus and still have not gotten to the place where they are actually following him. They've made some progress; they have come out of the room where they had been locked in fear. But instead of following they have simply returned to their old ways of doing things. It seems that when you don't know what to do next, you go fishing! But the love of Jesus is relentless, and he knows they are pretending to fish when really they are lost.

Jesus calls to them from the beach, where he has breakfast cooking, and suggests that if they would cast the net to the right side of the boat they just might catch a fish or two. It's almost as if Jesus is "baiting" them, setting them up for the next encounter with their risen Lord. They did as Jesus suggested (because it's always a good idea to fish where Jesus tells you to fish), and they caught so many fish, 153 to be exact, that the net was too heavy to haul in the catch.

It's at this point that the beloved disciple recognizes Jesus. Perhaps he's remembering when they first met Jesus, after they had fished all night and caught nothing. You may remember that we read this story earlier in the fifth chapter of Luke during Epiphany, where Jesus told them to go back out and try again, and when they did, they caught so many fish the nets were breaking. Today's story is similar to that one. And who knows why Peter was fishing naked and then put on his clothes to jump into the sea when he recognized Jesus, except that Peter was, well, he was being Peter!

Eventually the disciples get to shore and there they see a charcoal fire with fish and bread on it. The memories come rushing back – that time they fed 5,000 people with a boy's lunch of fish and bread, that last meal they shared with Jesus when he gave them bread and said, "This is my

body”, and that awful night before the crucifixion when Peter, warming himself before the charcoal fire in the courtyard, denied his Lord three times. All those memories bubbling up and here was Jesus with them again. It was just too good to be true and they dared not ask him anything for fear he would disappear.

Jesus did not accuse them or tell them he was disappointed or angry. Jesus fed them. After breakfast, Jesus taught them all by asking Peter some questions. Peter, do you love me? Three times he asked this and three times Peter said yes. The text says that Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him three times – maybe that’s because Peter knew Jesus loved him, even when he had denied Jesus three times. Using gentle, loving language Jesus tells Peter and the others to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, feed his sheep. It’s a beautiful story of forgiveness, love and commissioning, and it gives us an example of how Jesus calls us to follow him today, if we will recognize Jesus.

We have this amazing opportunity to tend and feed the sheep God places into our care. To be a shepherd is to provide pastoral care by following Jesus and caring for one another. It does not require a seminary degree, or any degree. We are never too young or too old. It doesn’t require financial wealth or even great amounts of time. It is simply to follow Jesus and do what Jesus has taught us to do, each of us in our own way, using the gifts God has given us, whatever they may be. Those eight fishermen on the beach that day were not wealthy or educated; they simply loved Jesus. They were not perfect, they denied Jesus, they were afraid, they messed up just as we do – three, one hundred fifty-three, a million and three times. But the relentless love of Jesus would not let them go.

Today in Adult Forum we had a conversation about pastoral care, about tending and feeding the sheep. In your bulletin you will find an insert listing some ways you can get involved in pastoral care, ways you can help feed and tend the flock here at Christ and Grace.

If you recognize Jesus, if you hear him asking you if you love him, if you want to help feed and tend the sheep, here is your opportunity to follow Jesus. Fill out the pastoral care card and return it in the offering plate, or take it home and pray about it and return it next week. And if a conversation about where you recognize Jesus or hear him asking for your love would be helpful, let me know and we can discern together how Jesus may be inviting you to tend his sheep.

The ending of the story in John is bittersweet. The disciples probably sense that they may not have Jesus with them again. But they have been given a commission to tend and feed his sheep. We have been given this same commission. It’s not always easy to recognize Jesus, and sometimes we will choose to go back to fishing, back to the way we used to be, because honestly it can seem easier to stay where we are. But the relentless love of Jesus will not give up on us and sooner or later we will recognize that Jesus is with us, calling us to follow him.

Do you love me? Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

Amen.