

Feed My Sheep
A Sermon on John 21:1-19
Third Sunday of Easter
May 5, 2019

Introduction

John the evangelist describes a dramatic encounter between Jesus and Mary on Easter Sunday. Today we have another dramatic encounter, this time between Jesus and Peter.

Mary and Peter may have been the two disciples who were closest to Jesus. John describes how those relationships are different after Jesus is glorified. Glorification in the Gospel of John is a three-step process: crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

Both encounters close with a commission. Jesus asks Mary to go to his brothers and proclaim the good news that he is ascending “to my father and your father, to my God and to your God.” Jesus commissions Peter, and each of us, to feed my sheep.

First Move: A Story That Doesn’t Quite Fit

Today’s text begins on the Sea of Tiberias, which is also called the Sea of Galilee. The disciples have gone home to Galilee and gone fishing. Jesus is standing on the shore, but the disciples do not know that it is Jesus.

Does that seem strange to you? When did we last see the disciples? Jesus appeared to the disciples twice in Jerusalem in last week’s text. Jesus commissioned them to go out and gather more disciples into the flock: “As the father has sent me, so I send you.”

Why, then, would the disciples return to Galilee and go fishing? They apparently are going back to their old livelihoods. And if the disciples have seen the risen Christ twice, why would they fail to recognize him when they see him again?

Nearly all commentators agree that today’s text, Chapter 21, was written by a different author from the author of the first 20 chapters of the Gospel of John. Most likely it was someone in John’s community who was imitating John’s writing style and who remains consistent with John’s theology. Yet all surviving Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of John include this Chapter 21. So if it was added on, it was added on very early. The tradition has always treated it as part of a unified whole.

The only contemporary scholar that I found who tries to reconcile the disciples' conduct in Chapters 20 and 21 is Gary Jones, an Episcopal priest, who calls it emotional overload. The disciples can't handle the sensory and emotional input they are receiving and they have to go away to process it. They take refuge in doing ordinary things that are familiar to them.

The rest of the commentators conclude that Chapter 21 combines three stories that were in the tradition: a miraculous catch of fish, a story about recognizing the risen Christ by sharing a meal, and a story that apparently was the first resurrection appearance to Peter.

Luke 5 has a similar story about a miraculous catch of fish; Luke makes it part of the call of the first disciples. After the fishermen cast their nets where Jesus commanded, they caught so many fish that their nets were breaking. Jesus begins to speak to Jesus and Peter says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Scholars speculate that this may have been a post-resurrection appearance with Peter's expressing shame about denying Jesus three times.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul writes that the risen Christ first appeared to Peter. Scholars believe that the appearance to Peter in today's text is most likely the original appearance that Paul refers to. It was the source of Peter's authority in the early church.

Ordinarily I don't like to get into historical criticism about where the stories originated. I make an exception today because Chapter 21 doesn't make sense in following Chapter 20 unless you accept the emotional overload theory.

Don't be troubled by that. It is widely accepted today that the authors of the gospels took stories about Jesus from the tradition and constructed a narrative frame that tied them together. The sequencing of the stories is largely the creation of the evangelists.

Today's stories break neatly into two parts: Verses 1 through 14 are the miraculous catch and the recognition of Jesus in sharing a meal, and verses 15 through 19 describes the post-Resurrection appearance by Jesus to Peter.

The disciples are fishing at night. This was common. The fishing was good at night in Galilee and it would allow the disciples to sell fresh fish at the market in the morning.

The disciples catch nothing. Jesus calls out to them from the shore, 200 cubits away, which is about 100 yards. "Throw your net to the right side of the boat and you will find fish."

The disciples don't recognize Jesus. They are fishermen by trade. Why would they obey the stranger yelling to them from the shore? Jesus' word is so compelling

that they obey and immediately haul in a miraculous catch of fish, so many that the nets almost break: 153 fish. Commentators over the centuries have speculated whether the number 153 is symbolic. St. Augustine said that it was the sum of all whole numbers from 1 through 17. It somehow represents fullness or completeness. Jerome said that Greek zoologists had recorded 153 known types of fish and the number 153 represents the universality of the mission to be fishers of people. Or John may just be emphasizing that this really happened and he can even tell you the exact number of fish they caught.

The miracle shows that the risen Christ has the same power to multiply the fishes and the loaves that the incarnate Jesus had when he fed the five thousand. Jesus is known for the abundance of his gifts in the Gospel of John. The first act in his public ministry is to turn six stone jars of water into wine. Each of the stone jars held 20 to 30 gallons of water.

The disciple whom Jesus loved is the first to recognize that it is the risen Christ, even from 100 yards away. He says, "It is the Lord."

Apparently Peter is the only one who hears the Beloved Disciple. Peter is impetuous. He had stripped to a fisherman's smock while he was out on the boat, but he ties his coat around his wrist and jumps into the water to swim ashore. Peter swims while the other disciples bring in the boat and the net full of fish.

Jesus has fixed a meal for the disciples. He has a charcoal fire going. Fish are frying on the grill. Bread is lying next to the fire. The meal has Eucharistic overtones. Jesus takes the bread and fish and gives it to him. The disciples recognize the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread, just as in Luke's Emmaus Story. Christians ever since have felt the presence of the risen Lord when they break bread at the table.

Second Move: The Encounter Between Jesus and Peter

Then the disciples fade out and it is just Jesus and Peter.

If this is indeed the first post-resurrection appearance to Peter, then this is the first time that Jesus has seen Peter since he denied him three times. Jesus looked down from the cross and didn't see Peter. He saw his mother and Mary Magdalene and the beloved disciple. Not Peter.

Why did Peter deny him? Lack of courage? Lack of faith? Not necessarily. The death of Jesus could be too intense for Peter to bear. John doesn't have a scene where Jesus prays in Gethsemane, but in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus asks Peter three times to stay awake while he prays. Peter falls asleep. It may have been a defense mechanism. The presence of God may have been so intense that Peter had to turn from it.

Same thing with watching Jesus on the cross. Who among us would want to watch Jesus suffer on the cross? Imagine how hard it will be on the supporters of Julius Jones if he is executed. Ministers who have been spiritual advisors to prisoners on death row have been traumatized by the execution. They get to know the prisoner and can't help but empathize with his vulnerability.

Jesus addresses Peter as Simon son of John. That is how Jesus first addressed Peter in the call of disciples in John 1. Jesus said, "You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas." We don't know how to respond to this. Jesus could be distancing himself from Peter by reverting to his name before he was a disciple. Or it could be that Jesus is the good shepherd who knows the names of his sheep.

Jesus does not ask for an apology, "Where were you?" Instead he asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

When you ask someone if they love you, it is not a good thing. You ask because you doubt that they really love you. You may even be intending to insult them.

"Do you love me more than these?" What does "more than these" refer to? It could be the boat and the fishing nets. That would be an even greater insult. Do you love me more than this stuff? It could be the other disciples. Do you love me more than you love the other disciples? That would conflict with John's theology. Jesus tells the disciples in his Farewell Discourse to show their love for Jesus by loving the other disciples. The most likely meaning is, Do you love me more than the other disciples love me? That is still a strange question to ask. It is almost as if Jesus is pitting Peter against the other disciples.

Peter doesn't flinch. He says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Peter had shown how excited he was to see Jesus by jumping off the boat and swimming ashore to greet him. Yet he doesn't try to prove his love by anything he has done. He proves his love by appealing to what Jesus knows in his heart.

There is a catch. There are three different Greek verbs in the New Testament that can be translated as love: ἀγαπάω, φιλέω and ἐράω. ἀγαπάω is the highest form of love; it is the love of God for humans and the love of humans for God. φιλέω is affection among equals, the love that friends have for each other. ἐράω means to love with sexual passion. It is erotic love.

The verb that Jesus uses is ἀγαπάω. Peter responds with φιλέω. Commentators are split as to whether the author is using the two verbs as synonyms or whether the author is making a distinction. Peter could be responding that he likes Jesus as a friend. Or, if φιλέω is regarded as a synonym for ἀγαπάω, Peter is saying, "Yes, I love you."

Jesus apparently is satisfied with Peter's response. For Peter to acknowledge his love is good enough. Jesus says, "Herd or feed my lambs." He trusts Peter with responsibility for the flock.

Jesus asks a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love [ἀγαπάω] me?" Peter responds with the same answer, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love [φιλέω] you."

Jesus again seems satisfied. He says, "Shepherd my sheep." Commentators are not sure that he means anything different from "Feed my lambs." The author John may just be using synonyms for stylistic variety.

Jesus asks a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" This time Jesus uses Peter's word φιλέω instead of staying with [ἀγαπάω]. Jesus could be resigning himself to the reality that is all he can expect of Peter.

Peter is hurt that Jesus asks him a third time. "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you." Peter is recognizing that Jesus has the god-like power to know all things. Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

Commentators regard these verses as a commissioning of Peter as head of the community. The commissioning is similar to Matthew 16:18, where Peter is the first to recognize Jesus as the Christ and Jesus gives him the keys to the kingdom.

Feeding the sheep and tending the flock means ruling over them. Peter is granted the authority that Jesus had over the flock. Peter does not replace Jesus as shepherd. Jesus is emphasizing Peter's duties toward the flock not his prerogatives. Jesus is telling Peter to show his love for him by loving the sheep.

In Chapter 10, where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," one of the traits of the shepherd is to lay down his life for his sheep. Jesus predicts that Peter will be martyred, just as Jesus was. Jesus says, "Follow me [to martyrdom.]"

The church historian, Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, is our source for the legend that Peter was crucified in the early 60's by the emperor Nero. Peter thought he was not worthy to be crucified like Christ so he asked to be crucified upside down.

Third Move: Authority That Flows from Love

Peter's authority comes not from his office but from his love for Jesus. Jesus makes the same charge to Peter as he makes to all disciples. Demonstrate your love for me by loving one another. That is the central message of the Gospel of John.

Pastor is derived from the German word for shepherd. All churches are looking for a pastor who cares for the flock. One of the best pieces of advice I received in seminary was from John Stemple, my professor in Intro to Ministry, who encouraged us to get to know the people in our congregations first. He said that they won't listen

to what you have so say as a prophet unless they accept you as their pastor. A lot of your sins will be tolerated or forgiven if the people know you care for them.

The movement toward non-denominational churches today is distressing. The pastoral role of the minister is diminished. The minister is there to proclaim the word. That is the way he or she feeds the sheep. There is more to ministry than preaching. There is knowing every person by name. Counseling them, knowing where they are on their faith journey. Helping them read and understand the Bible. Visiting them when they are sick. Helping them deal with the end of life. Taking part in the rituals that mark the stages of life: baby dedications, baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Feeding the flock is an awesome responsibility. That responsibility is too much for any one or two people in a congregation. It is shared. As Disciples of Christ, we believe in the priesthood of all believers. We all should be pastors to one another. It is in the community's love for Jesus that he continues to be fully known.

Our elders help lead worship each week. If you visit Disciples of Christ churches, you will always see an elder praying at the table and you often see them opening the worship service with announcements and responsive readings. Elders pray each week for the church and its members. Elders help with taking communion to shut-ins and visiting the sick.

Deacons also help with communion. They buy the bread and put the wine and bread on the table. They help serve communion. They greet visitors and hand out bulletins. They serve as church officers. They help guide and direct the mission of the church.

We are pastors not only to each other. Then we would be a membership church, where the focus is on the folks who are already here. Jesus does not put Peter at the top of the church hierarchy. He does not have authority over other disciples. Peter is charged with feeding the sheep who are being brought into the flock.

That is part of our charge, too. We care for the parents and students in Mother's Day Out, whether they come to church on Sunday or not. We care for the visitors who come to our Easter Egg Hunt and our Ice Cream Social. We care for the least of these, whoever they may be, the oppressed, the neglected, the forgotten. We don't expect anything in return. Then we are expressing *agape* love. We are acting out of unconditional positive regard for their well-being. That is how God acts toward us.

If we expect something back, we are practicing reciprocity—I do something for you so you will do something for me. I have done something for you, so you are in my debt. Yogi Berra, the baseball Hall of Famer, gave the best definition of reciprocity, "No one will come to your funeral unless you go to theirs."

Conclusion

The focus in today's text turns to what life in the community looks like after the resurrection. It is a community that is characterized by gifts of abundance and by recognizing the presence of the risen Christ among us. It is a community that honors the Great Commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. It is the Beloved Community that we hope to become.

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