

**Sunday, May 29, 2022**

**Feeding Sheep**  
(The Mission of "Caring")  
(Series: "From Meetings to Mission")  
(Message Six)  
(John 21:15-17)

**Scripture:**

*<sup>15</sup>When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"*

*"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."*

*<sup>16</sup>Again Jesus said, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"*

*He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."*

*<sup>17</sup>The third time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"*

*Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."*

*Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."*

*(John 21:15-17)*

**Message:**

**Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* began to deteriorate almost as soon as it was finished. The causes were multiple. The artist was mostly to blame.**

The Duke of Milan commissioned the wall painting around 1494 as part of the renovation of a convent. But DaVinci didn't paint in fresco, so the pigment didn't adhere properly to the surface. Within twenty years the paint began flaking.

Then there was the environment. The refectory sits in a low-lying area of the city, prone to humidity, and the north wall DaVinci painted was damp.

And the painting didn't always receive the best care. For decades it was unprotected from the steam of a nearby kitchen and the candle smoke from the sanctuary. At one point a door was cut into the wall, slicing off Christ's feet. Napoleon used the refectory as a horse stable; soldiers spent their idle time throwing bricks at the masterpiece. A flood once filled the rectory with

two feet of water for fifteen straight days, leaving the painting covered with mold. On August 16, 1943, a Royal Air Force bomb hit the convent, destroying the roof. It's a miracle the painting still exists at all.

That it does is a tribute to art restorationists. On numerous occasions, they've applied their skills to the painting. Their most recent effort lasted twenty-two years – from 1977 to 1999. Thanks to their work, this masterpiece can still be admired.

**Thanks to the work of Jesus, his followers and their work can also be restored.** The years take their toll on the best of saints. Our souls get soiled. Our luster diminishes. Our failures add up. We need cleaning up as well.

The Apostle Peter is a classic example. He messed up **regularly** and often spectacularly. We recited the litany last week: he messed up at Caesarea Philippi trying to prevent Jesus from going to Jerusalem (**Matt. 16:21-23**); he messed up at Christ's Transfiguration when he suggested building tents (**Matt. 17:4**). He messed up at the foot washing when he refused Jesus' service (**John 13:6-8**). He messed up when he said he'd give his life for Jesus and then bailed (**John 13:36-38**); he messed up in Gethsemane cutting off Malchus' ear (**John 18:10**).

But **Peter** knew the Master **Restorer**, and the Master **Restorer** knew **Peter**. Jesus chose Peter and invited him to be his disciple: "*Come, follow me.*" (**Matt. 4:19**) and Peter spent the next three years hanging out with Jesus. In spite of Peter always messing up, Jesus loved him and always forgave him.

**But now Jesus is leaving. How will his mission go forward? His kingdom built?** First, by **catching** people through our proclaiming and witnessing his Word. We talked about this last week. Second, by **caring** for and restoring one another, our focus this morning. And third, and next week on Pentecost, by **commissioning** disciples to be faithful to his mission.

## THE RESTORATION

**Jesus' relationship with Peter had begun on the sea of Galilee three years before.** Peter, a fisherman, had fished all night with his friends and caught nothing. Jesus, a carpenter, told them where to toss their nets. They could've ignored him. They were tired. They needed rest. They wanted to go home. But they took Jesus' suggestion and took home a boatload – literally – of fish.

So began a "Rocky Mountain" friendship between Jesus and Peter given to great peaks and low valleys. And then...Peter broke his promise to **Jesus**.

It was the eve of his crucifixion. Jesus had said all his disciples would abandon him. Peter had said, *“Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”* (**Mark 14:31**; cf. **Matthew 26:33**; **John 13:37**)

But Peter’s resolve was short lived. When the Romans arrested Jesus, **everyone ran** – including Peter. Peter would soon garner enough courage to return to the yard outside the court and warm himself with other servants by the charcoal fire.

**Luke** says, *“Peter followed from a distance”* (**22:54**). Peter was loyal, from a distance. The night was cold. The fire was hot. Peter was lukewarm.

**Three times**, people asked Peter about his relationship with Jesus. Three times, he denied he knew Jesus; three times, the salt of his betrayal stung Messiah’s wounds

After his third denial, a rooster crowed, just like Jesus said. **Luke (22:61)** says *“The Lord turned [his bloody and bruised face] and looked straight at Peter!”* The look was only momentary, but it lasted forever. And every morning, when the rooster crowed, the knot came back in Peter’s stomach.

Christ went on to be **crucified**. Peter **ran** for the shadows. Friday was tragic. Saturday was silent. On Sunday, after placing his heel squarely on the head of Satan, Jesus got up and **walked** out of a tomb.

Jesus greeted his first visitors to the tomb saying: *“Go tell his disciples and Peter!”* (**Mark 16:7**). Make sure the betrayer, who thinks he is a failure, gets the message. Don’t let him miss out. Don’t let him exclude himself or think he is disqualified. All heaven watched him fail; now all heaven wants him back on his feet.

The restoration of Peter will continue back in his hometown, back on Galilee’s Sea. Another dawn and new day, another miraculous catch of fish, another fire of coals, another meal (breakfast) with Jesus and friends. It was Jesus’ way of saying, “Peter, I know what you did. We need to talk.”

Jesus could have said, “I told you so.” Wagged his finger at Peter. Gone nuclear. He didn’t. Jesus says, “We can try again if you want.” He always says that. He offers Peter a **miracle**, breakfast, **forgiveness**, restoration, a **mission**. Gifts!

During and after a meal together is a great time for a conversation.

### **The First Exchange**

*“Jesus asks Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these other disciples do?’ Peter replies to him, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I do love you.’ Jesus says to him, ‘Please, feed my lambs.’”* (**21:15**).

Jesus uses his formal name, *Simon, Son of John*, like my mother used, *Douglas Alan Kamstra*. It is a glimpse of things to come. ☺ Peter must have wondered where he stood with Jesus.

This first question is achingly **vulnerable**. It almost seems inappropriate: “*Do you love me more than these other disciples do?*” (How can one really know?) But Peter had bragged. He claimed **exceptional loyalty** to Jesus: “*Everyone else may stumble, but not me.*” (**Matthew 26:33**) Everyone else will. I will not. Everyone else will. I will not. I will not. Then he did.

Peter knows he loves Jesus. He knows Jesus knows he loves him and says so. Peter also knows he doesn’t know how much the others love Jesus and so he can’t compare himself. He doesn’t. Peter is learning. Peter wants to claim his loyalty and love, but he knows **he can’t**. He is growing.

Jesus seeks one characteristic in all of his disciples: a repentant love for him.

Jesus’ command to “*Please, feed my lambs*” is Jesus’ request and charge to feed his **Church**, particularly the **weakest**, youngest, the marginalized, the most **vulnerable** members. The fact that Jesus uses *lambs* in his first charge and *sheep* in later charges may show a certain priority in his mission.

*Feed* means giving these little ones the nurturing knowledge that **Jesus loves them** through educating them in Jesus’ teachings: Sunday School, *Discipleship Journey*, Christian day schools, children’s messages, mentoring relationships...

Here Jesus turns Peter’s eyes downward instead of outward to a ministry of deep, down-reaching care: “I’ll catch them with you, you care for them with me.” Jesus reminds us who these “lambs” belong to; he calls them, **my lambs**. Our task is to take good care of the weakest, youngest, the marginalized, the vulnerable when Jesus brings them to us.

Peter is called not only to fish (as he was from the beginning) but now also to feed; not only to evangelize, but also to disciple (cf. the Great Commission). Jesus gives simple instructions: “*Take really good care that my little ones are fed healthy, wholesome food...because they belong to me!*”

## **The Second Exchange**

*“Jesus asks him again, a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ He says to Jesus, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I do love you.’ Jesus says to him, ‘Please shepherd my sheep.’” (John 21:16).*

Jesus asks the same question a second time, without the “more than” comparison, but this second, and shortly a third identical question, underscores the primary qualification for leadership in Christ’s Church: “*Do you really love Jesus?*”

While our love for Jesus is always flawed and incomplete, we need to be asking ourselves this question **over** and **over** and asking Jesus to make our love stronger. Jesus uses a stronger word here for love, *agape* – a self-giving, **self-sacrificing** love that seeks the **best** for the other person(s) (cf. **John 3:16**).

This first, second, third, and really the only question, honestly answered, is the foundation for being a disciple of Jesus.

Peter again responds with his heartfelt, “*Yes, Lord, you know that I do love you.*” Peter responds with the more modest word for love, *phileo* – a **deep affection** (a friendly kindness). His boasting is gone. His heart is honest. He doesn’t dare to claim a sacrificial, perfect love like Jesus has shown him.

Jesus responds, “*Please, then, shepherd, my sheep.*” Take good care of my people.

One wonders why Jesus didn’t use this opportunity to offer three different practical steps of discipleship: e.g., read your Bible and pray daily; go to church regularly; seek social justice always. These are all helpful things for disciples.

Maybe it is because this one thing, feeding them, will lead to other fruitful practices. If we really care, we will be praying; If we really care, we’ll search the Scriptures for food to feed them; if we really care, we’ll be present where the sheep gather; if we really care, we’ll care for the flock in practical ways: caring for the poor, etc.

Maybe it is because the main way we love him is by caring for his people (cf. **Matthew 25**).

The new word Jesus introduces this second time is *shepherd*. It brings to mind a shepherd’s **staff**, his **crook** (Our mission: “*By [fishing] **hook** or [shepherd’s] **by crook**...*”). *Shepherd* adds to the dynamic of caring: discipline, keeping in line, leading in and out. It means **welcome** and warning, teaching and **modeling**; shepherd is a big, all-embracing word. But the focus is simple: his lambs, his sheep, his flock.

### **The Third Exchange**

*“Jesus says to him a third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was really hurt that Jesus asked him a third time, ‘Do you love (have affection for) me?’ And Peter says to him, ‘Lord, you know absolutely everything; you know that I do love you.’ Jesus says to him, ‘Please, feed my sheep.’ (John 21:17).*

Peter is hurt. Jesus’ repeated question casts doubt on Peter’s sincerity and answers. The only person Jesus asks if they **loved him**, is Peter. But Peter is the **leader**.

In *Fiddler on the Roof*, the main character, Tevye, sits shyly with his wife, Golde, wondering at the strange new world where their daughter marries a man, not because of a matchmaker's order, but simply because of love. A question occurs to him. With uncharacteristic bashfulness he asks her, "Golde, do you love me?"

She responds, "Do I what?" He asks again. She evades. Eventually, in a charming song, they realize they love each other. "It doesn't change a thing, but even so, after twenty-five years, it's nice to know."

He says it doesn't change a thing; actually, it changes everything...

Can a human being love God? Can a person be on intimate terms with the divine? Can a mortal being experience union with the infinite? Jesus longs for it.

Jesus again says, "*Feed my sheep*." Jesus has work for Peter to do, flocks for Peter to pastor. Jesus doesn't retire us so we can passively sit off to the side. Peter was **discouraged** by what he had done, but he is not **disqualified**.

Three times Jesus invites us to feed his lambs and sheep. Scripturally, that means take really, really, really, good **care** of my people.

When we think of caregiving, especially in a church setting, we think about people facing surgery, dealing with chronic illness, or facing a traumatic event like a divorce, bankruptcy, loss of employment, death of a child, spouse, or sibling. That is important care to provide (especially for those in those situations), but that is not primarily the care Jesus and John have in mind here.

This story, chapter and entire book of the Gospel is about Christ's mission, and the primary focus for Jesus' disciples who are *on mission* is people's (yours and my) relationship with Jesus Christ: Do you love him?

Jesus calls his disciples who love him (represented by Peter here) to his mission: to take good care of the people Jesus entrusts to them – parents their children; children their parents; pastors their congregations; congregations their pastors, working people their customers, clients, patients, students, employers, employees; friends and their friends; and so on.

The Church, the community of faith, must **continually ask**, "*How are you and Jesus? Do you love him? How is your soul?*" The church should never be content with just providing emotional, physical, social, and financial care. Our love for Jesus feeds our love for his people, our love for his people feeds our love for Jesus.

**Jesus asks three questions to reverse and redeem Peter's three denials.** Peter's three affirmations of love for Jesus by a charcoal fire reaffirm Peter's place in Christ's family. Jesus is in the rehabilitation and transformation business.



Peter is forever **changed**: to **fish** for and catch people and to **reflect** the Great Shepherd. And so we can say, the two primary qualifications for shepherding Jesus' flock are **failure** and restoration (theologically, we call it grace and forgiveness) and **love** for Jesus.

Faithful shepherds (pastors, teachers, caregiver, leaders) who **care** (genuine love), **feed** (wholesome truth), and **shepherd** (strong leadership) are essential to the Church.

## THE REALITY

**So where are you? Somewhere between the fires? Questioning your place in God's plan? Figuring you are sidelined because of your failures?**

Let me remind you that Jesus is **not finished** with you yet. You might feel down, but you are not out. You might feel alone, but you have not been abandoned. Jesus came on a search and rescue mission. He did it for Peter. He can do it for you. Could you use some breakfast and a conversation? Some time with Jesus?

See, it is all about Jesus. The distance between Christ and Peter was one hundred steps. Jesus takes the first ninety-nine and a half. Peter still needs to look up in obedience.

Peter was told to meet Jesus in Galilee. He went. Peter heard Jesus was on shore, so he jumped in. Jesus invited him to breakfast. He ate. Jesus asked him questions. He answered. He followed. Peter stayed close to Jesus.

When you've failed God – and we all have - you'll do anything to avoid facing him. Failure fosters denial. Denial wants to avoid the very one we need. Don't give in to it; go to Jesus.

The most difficult journey is back to the **place** and/or **person** where you **failed**, but make sure you go. **Everything** depends on it.

No one makes it through the week failure free – not Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon. Peter. Me. You. We all do the very things we resolve not to do. When, not if, it happens, remember the miracle of the **fish**, remember the seaside breakfast, remember Jesus' **conversation**, remember how Jesus brought Peter's **heart** back to life.

Peter went on to preach the church's inaugural sermon on Pentecost. As you picture him preaching to thousands, remember just a couple weeks before he faced Jesus by a charcoal fire.

**Jesus still offers what he gave Peter – a complete and total restoration - and longs for us to accept it.**

**Prayer:**

Father, thank you for raising Jesus from the dead and for providing us a future in the middle of our guilt, our grieving, our pain, and our life's messes.

Thank you for the miracles you do in our life, for your daily provision, and for your willingness to forgive our failures when we come to you. Thank you for restoring our heart and soul. Thank you for using us, even in our brokenness, to care for each other, for the marginalized, the weakest, and the most vulnerable.

Father, make us shepherds, caregivers like Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as we follow him. Father, Son, Spirit, we love you; we love you; we love you.

In the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

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