

Feed My Sheep
Rev. Samuel Weddington, May 5, 2019

Micah 2:12-13

I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob, I will gather the survivors of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture; it will resound with people. 13 The one who breaks out will go up before them; they will break through and pass the gate, going out by it. Their king will pass on before them, the Lord at their head.

Two weeks ago, we proclaimed that Jesus is risen. This central Christian truth is an invitation to a deeper transformation, the first resurrection of our souls. When our hearts and minds are regenerated in this first resurrection, it is then we are able to cling to the promise of being raised as Jesus was raised. Last week, we saw that confession of this truth and committed belief in the Lordship of Jesus involves the new birth, being born again as Christ breathes into us his life giving presence. Today, we wrestle with the question of how we know we have been born anew, and where our new birth takes us. Let's turn our attention to our reading from John 21:1-19.

John 21:1-19 My translation

1 After these things Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed himself in this way: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas the Twin, Nathanael from Cana of Galilee, the sons of Zebedee [James and John], and two other disciples were together. 3 Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing." They told him, "We'll come with you." They went out in the boat, but they didn't catch a thing that night. 4 When the morning came, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn't know it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, **"Did you catch anything?"** They answered him, **"No."** 6 He replied, **"Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you'll find some."** So they cast it, but they couldn't drag it in because there were so many fish. 7 The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his tunic (he was naked) and jumped into the sea. 8 The other disciples came in the boat because they weren't far from shore, only about one hundred yards away, towing the net full of fish. 9 When they got to shore, they saw a campfire there, with fish and bread on it. 10 Jesus told them, "Bring over some of the fish you've caught." 11 So Simon Peter went and hauled the net full of large fish ashore (one-hundred and fifty three). Though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come! Eat breakfast!" Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came and gave them the bread and the fish. 14 This was the third time Jesus was revealed to the disciples after having been raised from the dead. 15 After the meal, Jesus spoke to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than *these*?" Simon Peter said, "Yes, Lord, You know that I love you." Jesus commanded him, "Feed my lambs." 16 Jesus asked him again, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Simon Peter responded, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus commanded him, "Tend my sheep." 17 Jesus asked a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" So Simon Peter told him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus commanded him, "Feed my sheep. 18 I'm telling you the truth, when you were young, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." 19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he commanded him, "Follow me."

The Word of God for the people of God...

It's a pretty rare thing for me to look into a passage and find the experts utterly disagree on its key meaning. When you dig into this text, there are some things that are unclear. For example, when Jesus asks Peter "do you love me?", Jesus uses the word *agapas*, or altruistic, divine love. When Peter says he loves Jesus, he uses a different word, *phileis*, which is more like brotherly affection and adoration. It's almost as if Jesus is asking, "Peter, do you love me as I love you?", in the divine sense, whereas Peter replies, "of course I care for you, Jesus, you are my brother." When Jesus asks Simon Peter the third time "do you love me," he switches to Peter's word. What is John suggesting here? Does our love always fall short of God's love for us? Then there is the question of what are the "these" Jesus is talking about when he asks, "do you love me more than these?"¹ What are these? Is Jesus asking Peter whether he loves Jesus more than "these" other disciples do? Is Jesus asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than he loves his brothers? Is Jesus asking Peter if he loves him more than the boat, the fish and the nets? Around here this time of year, maybe this is what we ought to be preaching: Peter, do you love me more than your bass boat? Personally, I think the commentators missed an obvious reference. Being a guy who never misses a good meal, maybe Jesus was asking Peter whether he loved him more than seconds on the fish and bread!

We could get lost in all the complexities, and I only mention them to illustrate that the Bible requires attention and care. We've got to think as God guides us. As I reflected on this passage, I think it is very possible that the "these" Jesus is talking about is all of the above. For you see, when Jesus is revealed to Simon Peter for the third time, Jesus approaches him personally. I think he is trying to both restore Peter in love, as well as shake him up a bit. Jesus is preparing Peter, equipping him in the power of the Spirit to go out in to a world that is hostile to the message so he can proclaim and share the good news of Christ's lordship. If Peter is going to do this, he needs to be renewed in mind and spirit; his heart needs reorientation such that all the "these" he clings to, all the "these" that have been steering his ship retreat before his call as follower and apostle.

As we discussed last week, the same Jesus who revealed himself bodily and set the disciples thinking aright so that they could truly confess that Jesus is Lord is the same Jesus who breathed into them His Holy Spirit. This encounter with the risen Christ has renewed them, reshaped them, and raised them into new life: they have been born again. And if you have been born again; if you have experienced the first resurrection and raised in newness of life, Jesus won't let you alone to go back to your old way of doing things. In Peter's case, while he had been renewed, his heart was still a bit shaky. Kind of like taking first steps on new legs, these disciples have been radically reoriented, but the tug of their old loves still nudge them back to what they know. At the first chance they get, they head back to the boats. They still resist this rebirth by the Spirit they have been given, and so Jesus comes along after a night of fruitless fishing and reminds them that apart from him, the nets they pull up from now on will remain empty. But when they heed his voice and obey his command, when they listen to their shepherd, there is no end to the bounty they will bring aboard. And the fish they catch today signal the catch to come as God equips the church, equips us all to be fishers of people.

And for Peter; and for you, believer, for you Christian, for you Spirit filled, reborn and renewed follower of the Lord Jesus, the sign that you have been called and filled with his resurrection life will be the question Jesus asks of you inwardly: do you love me more than these? Do you love me more than your job and status? Your comfort? Your security? Your convenience? That righteousness of your own, that righteousness of having it together, that you've wrapped yourself in your whole life? Do you love the Lord Jesus; have you been radically transformed by him to the point that all other loves pale in comparison? Do you love him more than these?

If your answer is yes; if that corner of your heart where you know and feel and you know that you know that you know, as my grandma says, that you love Him and He is yours, then Jesus commands us today: Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep! These are not commands from a to-do list Jesus wants followed. No. They are commands spoken at the level of the heart that shake and move you. Jesus' words, Jesus' commands are spoken in a love that wants to restore you to what you were made to be, and because they are spoken at the deepest

¹ For a good summary of the question at hand, see J. Harold Greenlee's "More Than These? John 21:15," *Journal of Translation*, 1(2), 2005.

level of who you are, they will grieve and wound you sometimes, just as they did Peter. Yet still, the words come: Do you love me? Truly? If so, care for, feed, protect, shelter, tend my little ones. Your shepherd, the one who gives us his reassuring calm so that we shall not want as the 23rd Psalm tells us, is the same shepherd who, by the Spirit, has empowered you to be deputy shepherds.

At the heart of Christian identity is this sense of mission, and not just mission in a general, I'm a decent kind of person way. No, at the heart of a Spirit filled Christian's life is the abiding conviction that we are to be about Christ's work, lifting up, caring for, making disciples of, instructing and teaching in Jesus' name throughout the world any and all we can find who will receive his witness. At the heart of a Spirit filled church isn't a priority on the form of worship, the content of our bulletins and powerpoints, the catchiness of our tunes, the cleverness of our phrasing, or sophistication of our teaching. Instead, a Spirit driven church is filled with the desire to love the Father who, in Christ Jesus and by the Spirit, wants us to love our neighbor; our contemporary worship brother; our traditional worship sister; our poor neighbor, our foreign neighbor, our kid neighbor, our adult neighbor, our elderly neighbor, our addicted neighbor, our infirmed neighbor as ourselves. And we do that when we tend them, when we love them, when we feed them the bread necessary to sustain their bodies, the bread of our presence alongside them as they are equipped to become full persons emotionally and intellectually, and most importantly, the living bread, Jesus Christ, who promises a new birth, life in his name through faith. First Presbyterian of Bristol, do you love Jesus more than these?

If you do; if you have been raised in that first resurrection; if you have experienced that new birth, then you need to know that Christ is going to lead you places, just as he did Simon Peter. Sometimes, he will lead you places we don't want to go. But here's the thing: as intimidating and overwhelming a job as that might seem, the one who asks us if we love him more than these is the one who loved us more than himself. The one who beckons us to come and follow him doesn't lead us out there to be all alone. No, he commands us to follow him because he goes before us; you can only follow someone who walks ahead! In the end, if you love him more than these, we rejoice because he has given us a mission more than possible because we do it by his life-giving, Spirit transforming power.