

SECOND READING: John 21:15-19 pg 116 NT

¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. ¹⁸Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, 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 said to him, "Follow me".

This is the word of the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

FIRST READING:: Romans 15:1-6 pg 163 OT

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ²Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." ⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the word of the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

“Feed and Tend”

*“The scene between Jesus and Peter, described in the 21st chapter of the gospel of John, is one of the most spectacular interchanges in the whole Bible, perhaps in all of literature,”*¹ says NT Wright. Quite a statement, but it IS indeed a critically important conversation. It takes place, you may remember, shortly after Jesus’ resurrection. We don’t know why the disciples are doing it, but it is obvious that they are trying to go back to the way things were. They are fishing. Maybe they’ve needed to clear their heads and find a place to think about all that’s happened. Maybe they just don’t know what else to do. But the fact remains that they’ve spent an entire night on the Sea of Galilee, throwing out nets and pulling them in...back-breaking work...even more difficult when nothing is being caught, which is what has happened. They are about 100 yards from shore as the sun is beginning to rise when an unidentified person calls to them from the beach and tells them to cast their nets on the other side. They do...and miraculously the nets become so full of fish they can barely haul them into the boat. John realizes right off who the person on the beach must be and he says, *“It is the Lord”*. And Peter, compulsively leaps from the boat, but not before putting on his outer garment to properly greet Jesus.

They have breakfast together. I can almost smell the fish and the bread cooking. And what great joy there is, all of them talking and laughing, talking and laughing, talk and laughing for the disciples are trying to take it in. They are sitting with the risen Lord, their friend, the one they last saw dying on the cross. What the women had said was true! Jesus is alive! Even so, amid this joy, there is an undercurrent of another feeling. Ah, it is guilt...for the last time Peter’s eyes met Jesus’ was in the courtyard of Palace when he denied him three times before the cock crowed. *“No, I don’t know the man,”* he had said over and over again. The three questions then that Jesus asks him after breakfast in their private conversation, probably while walking along the shore together, correspond to these. Jesus says, *“Simon son of John, do you love me?”*. (repeat three times). *“Peter’s night of agony...and Jesus’ own night of*

¹ NT Wright. *“John for Everyone. Pt 2.”* (Louisville: WJKP; 2002m2004), 163.

agony...return. "But because of Jesus' night, Peter's can be erased."² Jesus asks him the questions, and each time, after Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," Jesus gives him a command, a fresh challenge, a new commission. "Jesus doesn't say, 'Well, that's all right, then., you're forgiven'. He says, 'Well, then: feed my lambs, tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.'"³ His forgiveness of Peter is inherent in the trust being placed in him to now share in Jesus' own ministry, to be a shepherd, to feed Jesus' lambs and tend to his sheep. (*pause*)

So, this is the lesson that the Spirit has for us, friends. No matter the fact that we've all forsaken and denied him, what we are asked to do for Jesus by Jesus comes from a love deep down for him, and it is all about caring for his flock. What we are given to do for Jesus, by Jesus, isn't in order to EARN forgiveness. Nothing can ever do that. Forgiveness is given BY grace, pure and simple. Instead, our purpose, caring for others, is for us to do out of joy, a joy that comes from knowing not only that we are forgiven, but knowing that we can do what matters most for him. It is that simple. **The unmerited promise of mercy and salvation actually invites and frees us to lead lives of purpose for the Lord. And Jesus defines that purpose as being to feed and tend his flock.** (*repeat 2 times*).

I recently read an interesting little bit about Saint Ignatius Loyola. You may be familiar with Loyola University in Chicago. "Do you know what Loyola and his band of nine did in the 16th c that finally turned Pope Paul III around so that he granted them permission for them to form the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits? Well, the story goes that they arrived in Rome glittering with degrees. Some were even doctors of divinity. But the Pope was unimpressed. And then came the winter of 1538, a terrible winter, the worst in Roman memory. The men 'took on themselves the burden of the city's destitute. 10 men, mind you. They put the sick into their own beds, begged straw pallets and food for the all the others they tended to, and at times had as many as 3-400 crowded into a ram shackle residence which was all they could afford. So spectacular were their efforts that even the Pope could no longer ignore them. They were

² NT Wright.

³ NT Wright.

doing the most important thing for Christ. And in 1540 the Pope granted them the right to term themselves a genuine religious brotherhood. It was called the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits.’’⁴

Yes, tending and feeding Christ’s flock is more important than anything else and Christ’s lays it out here as the purpose for our lives. It is directly tied by Jesus to our love for him. It goes to what is in the human heart, and it requires the fullest amount of the soul. (*pause*) But it is costly. This love is love as courage, love as risk-taking, love as not wavering regardless of what needs to be done for the Other, or where we need to go or when we need to do it or whether we’ve done it before. This love is love that might irritate and inconvenience. It is a love which, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, sometimes, “*jams a spoke in the wheel*” and calls power into question. But it is love which never courts trouble for its own sake.

I occasionally read the blog by Rev. Debra Dean Murphy, and on searching this week for her comments on John 21, I saw an old one from Apr, 2010. She was then commenting on the aftermath of the coal mine explosion which had just happened in West Virginia. She said, “There’s been little talk of love here. Of course, family members and the mining communities have expressed love and support for each other. But with John 21 in mind, what would it mean, I wonder, to understand the naming of corporate greed and irresponsibility as an act of adversary-love? Or to say that confronting and resisting the powers that for decades have harmed the earth and those who toil deep within it as cruciform love in action?”⁵

Caring for Jesus’ sheep can mean love as courage and calling power into question. It can mean love as suffering, perhaps unto death as did Jesus. Love is as Love does. This is what Jesus meant when he said to Peter, “*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.*” Early Church Tradition says that Peter probably died by crucifixion.

What is required then, is that we, as a Christian community, regularly take a look at everything we are doing in our lives and in our church to insure that it falls within the ministry rubric that Jesus laid out when on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Professor Howard Snyder

⁴ Quoted in “*The Good Samaritan*” (Oct 21, 1979) In: The Collected Sermons of William Sloan Coffin. (Louisville:WJKP; 2008), 242-3.

⁵ Debra Dean Murphy. “*Mining for Love*” 4-14-10 <https://debradeanmurphy.wordpress.com/2010/04/14/mining-for-love/> (accessed 2/1/20).

of Asbury Theological Seminary warns us to “*use care that our Christian communities do not ease into being mere cordiality, courtesy or sociability, neighborhood potlucks.*” “*Regular worship attendance is essential,*” he says, “*as is hard-edged discussion of theology and Scripture. High expectations and an outward vista beyond the walls of the community must be maintained. Tending to the vulnerable lambs requires a congregation to engage with a shepherd mentality in providing the essentials, yes, but also to do whatever else is needed, all the while witnessing to a crucified and risen Messiah who continues to say, ‘follow me.’*”⁶

Wise words, I think. Wise words. The congregation here at FPC Copperas Cove, does very well at tending and feeding Jesus’ lambs, especially within the church. I am always struck with how warm, compassionate and generous you are to each other, to anyone who walks in these doors. It’s probably one of your greatest strengths. And if anyone here is wanting to be involved in tending and feeding Jesus’ sheep in the local, national or global arenas, they readily can and do take up the many opportunities offered by our busy Mission Outreach Team, a Team which promotes such things as..well....Souper Bowl of Caring. Here, people can personally connect with others doing work in the larger church too, which is an extremely socially active church, via the link which is each week listed on the Powerpoint or on the PCUSA & Mission Presbytery websites. FPC does well at tending and feeding Jesus’ lambs.

But yet even saying this, Professor Snyder is correct, we should use care that we never slip into being a church which simply floats along, doing *mere cordiality, courtesy or sociability, neighborhood potluck* things for Jesus. We need to, through efforts like the Vital Congregations Initiative, keep examining ourselves in order that we remain shepherds for Jesus’ ministry. For not only does a concern for the community benefit society, but it makes the church itself a tool for evangelism. Not only do people want to be a part of a congregation that puts its faith into action, they want to be part of a body of believers who make a difference in the world. And not only does Jesus, in “*one of the most spectacular interchanges in the whole Bible, perhaps in all of literature,*” tell us clearly that this is the purpose for our lives, he

⁶ Howard Snyder. Quoted in: Anon. “*Feed, Tend, Feed*” https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=3241 (accessed 1/31/20).

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ties it to our love for him. So, friends...I ask you,do you love Jesus? Do you love Jesus?

Do you love Jesus? Yes? Well, then, let's keep feeding his lambs and tending his sheep.

Amen.