

John 21: 15-25

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rec. David McCreath

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Feed My Sheep

Of the many personalities we discover in the Bible, the Apostle Peter is one of the more unique. I want to spend some time with him as we begin to look more deeply into the Gospel passage. Peter probably was a disciple of John the Baptist, along with his brother Andrew. When Jesus returned after his period of wilderness temptation, Peter and Andrew were among the first whom John directed to Jesus. With a clarity of insight, Jesus saw strength in Peter and conferred the name Cephas to him...that is, Jesus gave him a nickname which meant "Rock." Peter was a commercial fisherman, as were several of the apostles, a fact that will come up again in a few minutes. He was impetuous, and somewhat quick tempered; you may recall the tradition that he cut the ear off one of the centurions who came to arrest Jesus. (By the way, the tradition is not found in the Gospels; we don't know where it began.) It was those same characteristics for quick action that led Peter to become a leader among the apostles.

The period of time for our Gospel reading is shortly after Jesus' resurrection. It was the third such appearance of Jesus to the disciples, in a time when the band of followers were trying to figure out what to do next. Stories of Jesus' appearances were circulating, and the movement Jesus had started was rather loose and uncertain; there seemed no clear direction. Peter decided he would return to fishing, went back to his boat, along with a few of the apostles. As the story is told, they were not successful through most of the night. A man was seen walking along the shore; the man called to the boat, and was told of the lack of success. He told them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and their net was filled! How the commentator knew it was 173 fish the commentator was unwilling to venture a guess, but clearly the net was quite full!

It was then that one of the other men in the boat realized the man on the shore was Jesus! Impetuous, Peter grabbed a loin cloth, dove into the lake, and swam to shore, leaving the rest of the crew to bring the boat and the 173 fish to shore. Jesus shared a breakfast of bread and fish with his friends, then turned to Peter, in one of the more dramatic and fully commented upon passages of the Bible. Looking at Peter enjoying his vocation, and enjoying his colleagues, Jesus asks,

"Do you love me more than all this?" Peter, probably a bit surprised, answers, "Yes," and Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep." Jesus asks the same question twice more, and Peter becomes a bit irritated. Much has been made of these two or three verses. It is

hard to miss the parallel between the scene by the lake and the scene before Pilate's court, when Peter denied three times that he was one of Jesus' disciples. What was in Jesus' mind? Was this just a case of "gotcha?" If so, it was quite uncharacteristic of Jesus to be so firm. We wonder if this was a way of chastising Peter for his earlier denials; certainly, Peter would have made the connection, and, I suspect, was full of remorse.

Perhaps Jesus had something else in mind. What Jesus offered Peter were two important elements, conditions each of us wants and needs. He offered Peter a sense of belonging, and a sense of purpose.

First, a sense of belonging. We all want to feel a part of a larger group. Peter, in his denials, separated himself from the rest of the apostles. In front of the authorities and in front of his colleagues, Peter separated himself from them all. Is it any wonder that, after his denials, he left them and went out to weep. He knew he had ruptured the relationships he had with Jesus and the disciples. The first gift Jesus gave him was to renew his acceptance among the disciples: "Do you love me more than these?" When Peter was three times insistent that he loved Christ, he became a bit irritated at the persistence of Christ's question. It was painful, especially to be reminded of his denials in the courtyard. Perhaps later it occurred to Peter that Jesus was not scolding him, but instead, Jesus was restoring him to the community of faith by allowing Peter to affirm his faith three times, equal to his denials.

This was a very human incident. We all need and want to be accepted ... by friends, by family, by those around us who give us a sense of identity. It is not something we carve out for ourselves. We discover that we belong as we see ourselves in the eyes of those around us. Peter quite likely saw some criticism, even rejection, from the other disciples; that would be hard to take. This is also a critical element within the life of a congregation. People come here to find a sense of acceptance. Years ago I participated in a project to determine how congregations functioned on a series of elements. We used focus groups in congregations scattered across the country. I recall some of the focus groups I led, who were quite clear that they were a "Friendly Church." I learned this meant they were friendly if they knew you. In some of those same congregations I experienced the opposite when I visited on a Sunday morning... I can recall vividly being ignored in the service, and in the coffee hour because I was a stranger. Fortunately, that does not seem to be the case here at Stone Church; it is, however, something we need to keep in mind. People come to worship hoping to be accepted ... as a believer, and as a person in need of care. That is a very human need, and, just as we have been given an identity in Christ, communicated to us in the acceptance of one another in the context of worship, so it is the same for every person who enters this sanctuary. Just as we know we belong to this community of faith by the affections of others, so our affections mean much

to those who visit us. It is amazing to me, after all these years in several different congregations, to realize the importance of that simple "Hello, it is nice to see you today." It can erase a considerable amount of uncertainty and doubt and restore a visitor to a sense acceptance and worth. Christ's example with Peter can help us understand.

Jesus also offered Peter a sense of purpose. After each question, Jesus says "Feed my sheep," or "Tend my lambs." Quite naturally, we all want to have a sense that what we do, what engages us, is important, and that our efforts matter. So it is that, after Jesus assures Peter that he is still a part of the company of disciples and not an outcast, Jesus gives him responsibility. He tells Peter, in a sense, "you have something of value that will contribute to the work to which we have committed ourselves." That is valuable, for it gives Peter good work to do ... and is that not what we all seek? We want the work we do to be meaningful ... to count for something. And there is more ... not only is Peter given something to do; Jesus asks Peter to become the leader he has shown himself to be. The shepherd is responsible for care of the sheep ... finding the green pastures and clear water; he protects them from wild animals ... remember Psalm 23? That is analogous to the work that Jesus is committing to Peter. In a sense, no matter what feelings between the two men came about by Peter's denials, He is now drawn back into the company of Jesus and disciples.

Just now, Stone Church is at a point the political pundits like to label an "Inflection Point." We are a congregation active in care for each other, interested in our growth in faith, and continuing to serve the community around us. Last Sunday we celebrated the beginning of a new year in ministry; the patio was ringed with tables from the various program elements of our life together ... education, service, and community welfare. We are just steps away from beginning a new mission service in the Roycott House. We are beginning the search for a new installed pastor. And, of course, the important annual commitment for next year's support. The lessons that Peter learned give us a clue for the course of our faith journey. Christ asks us, "do you love me more than all this business and activity? If so, feed my sheep." In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Samuel declares, "Sacrifices are fine, but obedience is more important." My hope is that, as we move through the changes of the next few months, we will not forget that to be committed to Christ and His mission is to be engaged in the care of creation, and service to our friends and neighbors. Jesus charged Peter to realize that commitment means. That challenge is as alive today as it was those many centuries ago.