

C Easter  
April 14, 2013  
Rev 5.11-14  
John 21.1-19  
"Feed My Sheep"

One recent Sunday, a young boy arrived to his Sunday school class late. His teacher knew that the boy was usually very prompt and asked him if anything was wrong. The boy replied no, that he was going to go fishing, but that his dad told him that he needed to go to church instead. The teacher was very impressed and asked the boy if his father had explained to him why it was more important to go to church rather than to go fishing. To which the boy replied, "Yes, ma'am, he did. My dad said that he didn't have enough bait for both of us."

In today's gospel account some of Jesus' disciples have gone fishing, but to no avail, at least to begin with. Once again the practice of fishing plays a central part in the message of the passage.

The account in John's gospel that we have heard today occurs some time after Jesus has been raised, after he has appeared to Mary at the tomb, and to the disciples two times when they were meeting together in some particular house in Jerusalem. Remember that in the first of those post-resurrection visits, Jesus says to his followers, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." That actually turns out to be a major theme for today's reading from chapter 21, too.

Sometime later at least seven of the disciples have returned to Galilee, and we find them fishing on the Sea of Tiberias, also known of course as the Sea of Galilee. They have been out on the lake all night, but have caught nothing.

Some of the disciples have returned to Galilee, probably to the same villages in which Jesus found them when they were called to be his disciples. I wonder if they have given up on the work that Jesus gave them to do? I wonder if they have lost their hope, even though Jesus had told them that he would send the Holy Spirit to be with them and had even breathed that Spirit into them when he first appeared to them in that room? I wonder if they had despaired, even though Jesus has told them time and again not to be afraid?

The disciples must certainly be deeply discouraged and despondent. It at least appears that their zeal for the good news of Jesus has flagged. They have been out on the lake all night and have caught nothing. They must be exhausted and dejected and miserable.

A stranger appears on the beach and tells them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. They do that, and when they begin to pull in their nets they are filled with fish. One of the disciples exclaims, "It is the Lord!"

Peter throws on his clothes and jumps overboard. Apparently it was common in those days for fishermen to work stripped down to their undergarments. Peter apparently didn't want to appear before Jesus dressed in that way, so he puts on his clothes, jumps overboard, and swims to the shore. Impetuous, impulsive, spontaneous Peter is still the same man. Although he has only recently denied that he even knew Jesus three times, his love for his teacher overcomes all restraint, and he throws himself into the lake so that he can reach Jesus right away.

Have you ever done anything like that out of your love for the living Christ? Acted impulsively, even recklessly, just because of your unrestrained love for him? What keeps you and me from throwing ourselves into the water out of unbounded love for the one who died for us, but who lives? And I wonder if we think the whole question is just silly. Why would we do such a thing? Only religious zealots do things like that, right? Only religious fanatics give their very being, their very all, their lives, their security, their possessions to the one they worship, right? No person in possession of his or her senses would do such a thing.

When Peter and the others arrive on the beach, Jesus has built a fire and is roasting fish there, and he has bread, too. Jesus tells them to bring some of the fish they have just caught. When the fish are done, Jesus takes them and the bread and gives these to the disciples, what appears to be a very pointed reference to his actions at the last supper, even though John doesn't record these events as do Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The one who feeds the disciples on the shore is the one who will feed them in the coming years as they carry out his continuing mission. The one who feeds you and me as we also continue to carry out his mission. The one who gives us his peace and sends us into the world.

John is not explicit regarding the setting of what happens next, but I can imagine Jesus asking Peter alone to walk with him down the beach. I can imagine them walking in silence for awhile, then Jesus, continuing to walk, says to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" We are not sure what "these" refers to, but perhaps it means the security of a reliable occupation, the close friends he has made among the other disciples, and probably other things as well.

Do you love me more than anything the world has to offer? Do you love me more than security and safety? Do you love me more than home and wife and children and friends? Do you love me more than comfort and ease? Do you love me more than these?

Peter replies, "Yes, Lord. You know I love you." Jesus responds, "Feed my lambs." A second time, Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And a second time Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus responds, "Tend my sheep." A third time, Jesus asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" The text says Peter is hurt because Jesus asks him the same question three times. He replies, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

Many careful readers think Jesus asks Peter to affirm his love three times because he denied even knowing his master three times. Perhaps so. But regardless, it is clear that Jesus wants Peter to know very clearly what it means to love him.

Because it is Jesus' sheep and lambs for whom Peter is to care, it is very clear that the ones referred to are other believers, other disciples, other followers, others who have chosen the not-always-easy path of Jesus Christ.

Note very carefully how all of this works. If one loves Christ, one cares for his sheep. If one loves Christ, one devotes time and effort to the well-being of others who love him. Jesus in the other three gospels speaks of "little ones" who follow him, those whose spiritual journey is only beginning, whose spiritual development is only starting, who can be easily misled because they haven't yet developed a strong foundation of trust and knowledge. I believe that Jesus may be speaking in particular of these ones, especially because he calls them "lambs."

If we love Christ, we are to feed his lambs and tend his sheep. Period. If we truly love the Messiah, we are bound to care for other disciples who are on the way. This passage pretty much sinks the common misconception that one can be a Christian alone. We are not allowed to be lone Christians, because passages like this one prohibit the practice. And be assured, this is not the only passage with this message. We are not allowed to be lone Christians because to follow Christ is to be immersed in the often messy but sometimes deeply gratifying work of caring for brothers and sisters in innumerable ways.

To love Christ is to care for his sheep. One cannot claim to love Jesus and then fail to feed his sheep. It is a commandment, and we don't have the option to ignore it. This isn't the first time in John's gospel when Jesus tells his disciples to demonstrate agape. After he washes their feet on the night of his betrayal, Jesus says to them, I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

In chapter five of the book we know as the Revelation to John, John finds himself transported in a vision into the throne room of God, which is populated with angels and strange creatures and elders of the faith, and all of them are singing. And John records the words he hears this great multitude singing: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."

This Lamb commands us: if you love me, then love my own lambs, and demonstrate that love in what you say and do. To love him is to care for his sheep.

"Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." Amen.