

The Casserole
John 21:15-19
May 5, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

Things have been a little busy at our house, trying to get ready to sell it. Normal activities have kind of fallen by the wayside. We're keeping up with the laundry, but we're delaying it until the situation becomes desperate for those of us who care about wearing clean clothes. And unfortunately, there have not been very decent, home-cooked meals. Cooking—I'm sure this is not news to you—takes time. And time is what we have not had. Cooking also makes a mess, at least the way I do it, and then it takes even more time to clean up the mess and restore the kitchen to its house-hunter readiness.

And as much as we had good intentions when we first got married, I am pretty much in charge of the kitchen. I am the household manager when it comes to making sure that we have sufficient food in the refrigerator, pantry, and lunchboxes. And if it is going to be cooked at our house, I am the one who will cook it. Do not deduce from this description that I particularly enjoy cooking. I mean, the actual cooking isn't so bad, and I don't mind it for holidays or special occasions, but the relentless feeding of human bodies so many times a day gets me down. And worse than the actual cooking is the planning and thinking of what to cook. I'd prefer to use my limited creativity for something else.

So when Jesus tells Peter to feed his lambs and tend his sheep, not once but three times, it is not immediately inspirational for me. It makes me kind of tired. And a little exasperated. Even *Jesus* is expecting me to get some kind of meal on the table. Now maybe some of you enjoy taking care of people and cooking more than I do. I know for a fact that several of you are better at cooking than I am. So maybe this strikes you as something you want to get in on, right away. Feeding and tending come easily to you and are fulfilling for you.

Before we try to figure out what Jesus meant by “feed my lambs,” because I don't really think he was talking about cooking, or only about cooking anyway, we need to think about who Jesus is talking to, and why it makes a difference on how we interpret what he says.

Jesus is talking to Peter. This is after the resurrection, and Jesus has appeared on the beach while Peter is out in the fishing boat with about half the other disciples. Peter has jumped into the water to rush to Jesus, and now they're gathered together, eating some grilled fish and bread around a campfire on the

beach, a charcoal fire, John specifies, which is an odd detail to include.

The last time we heard that detail about a charcoal fire in John also involved Peter, in the courtyard, after Jesus had been arrested and taken away. It's the scene we usually identify as "Peter denying Jesus three times," but I'm indebted to Karoline Lewis¹, a scholar of the Gospel of John, for pointing out something that is different in John's Gospel about this scene. In the other three gospels, the questioning of Peter in the courtyard generally goes like this: someone says, "Hey, aren't you one of Jesus's disciples" or "weren't you with Jesus?" And Peter replies with something along the lines of "I don't know him," or "I don't know who you're talking about." There are some variations, but it's almost all Peter denying Jesus, rejecting the idea that he even knows Jesus. His denials are about Jesus, so hence the "Peter denies Jesus three times" heading it gets in the Bible.

In John, however, it's a little different. The questions are the same, "aren't you one of his disciples?", but Peter's answers are focused not on Jesus but on himself. He answers "I am not." Twice. And then when asked if he was in the garden when Jesus was arrested, he denies it again without any words reported by John. Rather than denying Jesus explicitly, Peter is denying *himself*, his own role as a disciple, his own calling to be a follower of Jesus. He's acting as if the past three years hadn't even happened, that he hadn't felt a pull to follow Jesus, that he hadn't left behind his job and his family, that he hadn't known himself to be a disciple. Yes, he's denying Jesus, but he is also denying himself.

Here is Peter around another charcoal fire, this time in the early morning light of the beach rather than the night time of the high priest's courtyard. And this time, crucially, Jesus is present, too. This gathering and what Jesus says to Peter doesn't make much sense without remembering that previous charcoal fire and Peter's words.

Jesus asks Peter, three times, "Do you love me?" And Peter gets to answer, three times, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." You see the connection, yes? Three times, Peter has denied who he himself was, and denied that he was even Jesus's follower, but Jesus gives him an opportunity to recommit, and reconnect, and remember who he is, who has claimed him, and whom he follows.

Jesus is re-calling Peter, saying "follow me" again. And following Jesus isn't simply words, or even a commitment of the heart for Peter: it requires some follow up, by feeding lambs and tending sheep. And following Jesus isn't just a commitment that Peter can accomplish in isolation: he has to involve himself in the lives of those sheep and lambs.

1 <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4583>

We are Peter. We have denied Jesus by denying who we are as his followers. We have, either in word or deed, either by commission or omission, claimed that we do not belong to Jesus, that we are not his disciples, that Christ has not called us to follow him.

We are Peter. Jesus gives us second, and third, and fourth chances to reclaim our identity and belonging as disciples. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks us, as many times as it takes. "Yes, you know that we love you," we respond, enough repetitions that it finally sinks in to our own souls.

We are Peter. Our instructions are clear. Feed Christ's lambs. Tend Christ's sheep. Those sheep are right here in this room, and those lambs are beyond our walls. And those sheep are hungry.

Those sheep are hungry for the same things that Peter needed: they are hungry for forgiveness, for second and third and fourth chances, for a calling and a purpose, for belonging. And it's our job to get out there and feed them.

There are sheep in here and out there who are literally hungry. Hungry for real, tangible, tasty food. It's our job to get out there and feed them too.

There are sheep in here and out there who are hungry for acceptance, desperate to be loved for who they are, no matter what they look like, or how much is in their checking account, or what their family looks like, or where they come from, or how old they are, or how smart they are, or whether they have a job, or who they voted for, or how much they trust Jesus today. They are hungry to be loved, and it's our job to get out there and feed them, too.

There are sheep in here and out there who are hungry for meaning. They are hungry to do something that matters and make a difference. It's our job to get out there and feed them, too.

There are sheep in here and out there who are really, really scared: scared at what is happening around them, and the pace at which it is happening. They are hungry to have something stronger than themselves to hold onto, starving for security. It's our job to get out there and feed them.

One of my friends from college has recently begun doing some writing. She is hilarious and poignant and wise all at the same time. She wrote recently about how much she enjoys taking food to her friends and acquaintances who need a meal: if someone has had a baby, or is sick, or is grieving, for instance. I know lots of you have done the same. But Amy has a problem: she hates to cook and isn't particularly good at it. She would get overly ambitious and try out complicated new recipes that left her sweaty and cursing in her kitchen and left her friends with barely edible meals.

Then, she had a great discovery. Here's what she writes: *This year, something dawned on me in a blinding flash of insight. Most friends only need meals one or two times a year and when they do, multiple people are bringing them. This provides automatic dinnertime variety for the friend in need and means that I do not have to worry one iota about varying my offerings. Holy flying cannoli! If I want to be cheerful bringer of meals, all I really need is one casserole! If I can make one delicious, easy thing that almost everyone enjoys, I'll never need to worry about what to bring. I will just bring MY THING and cheerfully drop it off with hugs and smiles. Why didn't I think of this before I attempted to make breaded veal cutlets with a summer squash bake for my friend with Influenza-A?*²

We can do *one casserole* for those sheep. One casserole is all it takes to feed hungry sheep. All we need to feed them is love. We can do this. You can feed the lambs and tend the sheep with love.

2 <http://www.goodandawkward.com/great-discovery-need-one-casserole/>