

Feeding and Tending

John 21:15-19

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First Presbyterian, Luling

All week, as I've been pondering this Scripture, I've been singing a song in my head. For a few years when I was in elementary school, we had a children's choir at church, and one song we sang was based on this passage. And in the way that things stick in your head when you learn them as a child, and the way that songs can stick in your head easier than history facts, this song has stuck in my head for all these years. I'll spare you my singing, but the words went like this: "Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, over all a vigil keep. In my name, lead them forth, gently as a shepherd. When they wander when they stray, their protector be. As ye do unto my flock, thus ye do to me." YouTube has verified my memory, and there is a verse I didn't remember.

Jesus's clear instructions to Peter, repeated three times, are to tend his lambs and feed his sheep. As the song suggests, these instructions tie together a lot of themes both throughout Scripture and particularly throughout the Gospel of John. We'll come back to some of that. This interaction with Peter is also intensely personal and intimate, specifically about Peter.

Remember back a few chapters, on the night Jesus was arrested. He predicted to Peter that Peter would deny him three times. And Peter did. In John, these denials take a little bit different form than they do in the other Gospels. Each time, Peter is asked not if he knows Jesus, but if he is one of Jesus's disciples. "Aren't you also one of his disciples?" he's asked, two different times, while he's standing around a charcoal fire. The third denial is a "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" Peter keeps saying "I'm not." I'm not one of his disciples. I wasn't in the garden.

Today's passage is attached to what we talked about a couple of weeks ago—the meal of bread and fish on the shores of the Sea. Jesus cooks that fish on a charcoal fire. And yes, that's deliberate. Yes, Peter's supposed to remember the last time he was standing around a charcoal fire. I've tried to find the answer to this question, but I haven't found anything definitive. It seems to me like a charcoal fire would be a bit of a novelty—you couldn't just go to HEB and buy a bag of briquettes. A wood fire would have been ordinary. But the smell of a charcoal fire would be novel enough that it would trip Peter's memory. Not that he probably needed any reminding. Isn't it just like humans to remember so

clearly our worst moments?

Having denied being Jesus's disciple three times, now Jesus gives Peter three chances to say he loves him. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. You know everything. You know that I love you." Maybe Jesus didn't need to hear it three times, but maybe Jesus knew Peter needed to say it three times. Just before Jesus predicted Peter's denials, he gave all the disciples—even Judas—a new commandment, the commandment to love one another. Here, Jesus is recalling that new commandment and stretching it out to include others, not just the twelve.

"Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, over all a vigil keep. In my name, lead them forth, gently as a shepherd. When they wander, when they stray, their protector be." I don't need to tell you that the image of God as a shepherd is ancient. Psalm 23 is the best known example, of course, but there are others. And Jesus himself, earlier in John, has said "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I know my own and my own know me." Now, Jesus stretches this, too. Peter is supposed to feed lambs and tend sheep. Peter is supposed to be the shepherd. As are we.

The sequence is important, because it applies equally to us as to Peter. Jesus expresses forgiveness toward Peter and gives him as many second chances as he needs. Jesus's forgiveness leads to Peter's expression of love back toward Jesus. But Jesus turns that love outward, toward others, toward the sheep and the lambs.

We, too, receive forgiveness, as many second chances as we need. We mostly don't need reminding of all the ways we've messed up, and we may need way more than three chances to get the answer right. The answer always is, "You know that I love you, Lord." And forgiveness and love for Jesus gets turned outward into love for the flock, love for those we're supposed to take care of, love for those who are vulnerable.

It's much the same command as Jesus gives at the end of Matthew, to serve "the least of these," those who are hungry, those who are imprisoned, those who need clothes. Feed my lambs, tend my sheep.

We did a bit of feeding and tending yesterday evening. We fed our neighbors. We welcomed them. We served them. We learned from them.

There are more, nearby and far away. There are ten broken and wounded families in Buffalo, New York, a terrorized community, a gaping wound in our country caused by racism. They need feeding and tending. They need to be served and to be loved. They need us to learn from them.

Those are the people on my heart this morning, but there are so many other lambs, so many other sheep, so many other people who Jesus has placed in our flock. We have been forgiven, we've been freed to love and serve and learn. Feeding and tending are actions, and Jesus calls us to put our love into action.

"Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, over all a vigil keep. In my name, lead them forth, gently as a shepherd. When they wander, when they stray, their protector be. As ye do unto my flock, thus ye do to me."