

May 5, 2024
Rev. Lisa Schrott
John 21:15-19
Tending and Feeding

Join me in prayer: Speak to us, living God, as you have spoken to our ancestors: through the voices of your prophets, the breath of your Spirit, and the life of your Son, so that we may live according to your word; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

We are in the sixth Sunday of Easter, a season lasting seven weeks until Pentecost Sunday on May 19. The season of Eastertide is traditionally a time when we focus on discipleship. We hear stories of how Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection and how he encouraged them to live out his ministry of care and compassion, of justice and mercy.

Last week we heard Jesus' call to abide in him - to rest and dwell in his love and grace, for he is the vine and we are branches. Dwelling in Jesus, and Jesus dwelling in us, means we bear the fruit of Jesus. Jesus did not give the disciples a detailed to-do list of what they should do after he departs. Instead, he tells them that the fruit they will bear is love: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." This week we hear Jesus' parting words to the disciples about how to embody this love.

Our scripture this morning is the last of Jesus' appearances to the disciples in the Gospel of John. The disciples had gathered to fish at the Sea of Tiberius (also known as the Sea of Galilee). Early in the morning, a man appeared on the lakeshore and asked how many fish they had caught. The disciples said they had caught none. And the man told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. When they had done that, they had so many fish that they could not haul in the net. They then recognized the man as Jesus. The disciples went ashore and ate a breakfast of fish and bread with Jesus: We pick up the story here in John chapter 21, beginning at verse 15:

When 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." A 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." He 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. Very 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." (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 Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

"It is said that "history repeats itself ", and the parallels drawn here might bear that out. But we also can learn from history. From the call to Abraham to the Protestant Reformation, the scriptures and the history books recount the faith and the failure of God's people to live up to their calling. It is the story of God's power and forgiveness. The Church is not MAN MADE and it is more than the sum of its individual members, but a testimony to the POWER of God's redeeming love at work among men in the world. Christ said, "for where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them". Our togetherness in Christ makes us strong." So closes the 10th anniversary history of Okemos United Presbyterian Church, as we were known then, written by Meridian Township official and PCO church leader, Carlene Webster.¹ Can I get an amen?

Over the past few weeks I have been delighting in reading histories of PCO and its predecessor churches. And hearing stories from so many people, like we heard last night. So much what I have read and heard is summed up by Carlene Webster's words. The church is greater than the sum of its parts. It is a testimony to God's redeeming love at work in the world. And the scriptures we hear each week in worship and sit with in the Conversation and Contemplation group and study in the Thursday morning bible study or Sunday school classes, recount the faith, and the sometimes failure, of God's people to live up to their calling. This is the story we hear in our text this morning from the Gospel of John. This is the story of our life together. This is the testimony of God's redeeming love at work in the world.

When 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." Three times Jesus asks Simon Peter if he loves him. And three times, Peter responds that he does, an echo of his three-fold denial of Christ on the night of his arrest. Peter's three-fold affirmation of his love for Jesus is followed by three commands. What does it mean to love Jesus? Feed the lambs, tend the sheep, feed the sheep. Jesus ends the conversation with words that echoed his call to Peter and the other disciples a few years before: "Follow me."

Follow me. These words seem so simple on the surface, yet Peter and the other disciples knew firsthand that to follow Jesus meant venturing into unknown territory. It meant risks. It meant messiness, for tending and feeding sheep is not an easy task – whether we are talking literal or metaphorical sheep. For the disciples it was time to move from the theoretical to the personal. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples were now Christ's body on earth. Christ's mission was now their mission. It was now their time to tend and feed. The disciples needed to grasp that the empty tomb was not merely an event, not something to simply remember or commemorate. Rather it's something we live and breathe. Resurrection has consequences. It's something we become, something we practice in the living of our daily lives when we answer "yes" to Jesus' command "Follow me."

¹ Carlene Webster. *The History of the Presbyterian Church in Okemos*. Prepared for the 10th anniversary celebration of the Okemos United Presbyterian Church.

Follow me. As Carlene Webster noted, history does repeat itself. Jesus' disciples in the early first century followed the instructions to tend and feed the lambs and sheep. The youngest to the oldest. The most vulnerable to the toughest in the flock. They tended and fed. And the message of Jesus' love and grace spread from Jerusalem to Samaria to the ends of the earth.

In 2003, PCO member Elaine Davis wrote a marvelous document detailing the early history of the Presbyterian congregations that have existed in Meridian Township. There have been three congregations, the first two short-lived. The third congregation is our present congregation.²

On September 27, 1843, eight people met at the home of Stephen Alverson in the northeastern part of Meridian Township to organize the First Presbyterian Church of Meridian. The population of what became known as Meridian Township at the time of the 1840 census was approximately fifty people. Families lived on scattered farms but no villages had yet been established in the forest and swamps of the new township. The ends of the earth so to speak. And yet the lambs and sheep were tended to by this church. The congregation grew slowly over the years. In 1853, when the last entry was made in the existing Session minute book, the congregation numbered 36.

Elaine Davis writes that there appears to have been no active Presbyterian congregation in Meridian Township for the next nine years until the Presbyterian Church of Okemos was organized on March 9, 1864 in the Okemos schoolhouse. The Rev. Alfred Bryant, who had been the circuit rider preaching occasionally, was called as the pastor. We don't have Session minutes from this congregation, but we have some newspaper articles about the church.

From its earliest days, the church sought to tend and feed the minds and souls of the congregation. I was particularly interested to learn that in February 1880, the Presbyterian Church hosted a free lecture by Prof. Turner of Brooklyn, NY on phrenology. Phrenology, the belief that the conformation of the skull indicated aspects of one's intelligence and personality, was a trendy subject in the late 1800's. Social issues of the day were also addressed. In January 1884 the Rev. Mr. Wilson of Lansing gave a temperance lecture. He must not have been very convincing, because we learn that just a few months later in August, "At the temperance meeting last Sunday evening at the Presbyterian Church this question was discussed: 'Resolved, that license is more beneficial to the community than prohibition'."

This tradition of tending and feeding souls through educational programs, community events and especially music is part of the 60 year heritage of our current congregation. Just two months after the Rev. Howard Kehde was hired in 1963 to be the organizing pastor of what would become our current PCO, the first choir director and first organist were hired. We heard the story last night about Rev. Kehde transporting and dropping the church's first organ.

² Elaine C. Davis, The Presbyterian Congregations in Meridian Township. March 2003.

Apparently Dr. Kehde thought the organ was no worse for the wear. I'm not drawing any conclusions, but the first organist, Janet Rutherford only served for two and half months before the second organist was hired in January, 1964. I'm grateful that our current organ is not easily dropped, for we have had the blessing of Marlene's playing for 26 years.

Jesus asked, "Do you love me?". We answered, "Yes, Lord we love you". Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." And we did. PCO has been feeding the lambs for 60 years. I think about all of the children who learned that no matter what happens any place else in the world – in school, on the playground, on social media, at home – the church is a place where they will be welcomed and respected and cared for as the beloved child God that they are. No questions asked. No need for pretense. Tended and fed. A legacy passed on. Children raised in this church raising their children in the church. Baptismal vows lived out.

"Do you love me?", Jesus asked. "Yes, Lord we love you", we answered. Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." Care for each other. When the days are long and full of heartache. When nothing makes sense. Be a shoulder to lean on. When you can't seem to bail the water fast enough to prevent the boat from sinking and it seems that the storms of life will swamp you, Jesus said, be there for each other. The stories I have heard in my two and half years here are full of tenderness, full of beautiful displays of caring for each other. Of celebrating triumphs and mourning losses. Of giving of yourself, sacrificially for the benefit of others. I can think of no more beautiful reflection of what this looks like than the gifts left to this congregation by Chris Doemel. In a letter to the congregation sharing news of the generous gifts Chris bequeathed to PCO, former pastor Dr. Rob Carlson shared comments from Chris' father Bill Doemel. Bill spoke of how joining this congregation fundamentally changed Chris' life. "He valued the opportunity to join with others and make music...was pleased to make meaningful contributions to the leadership of the church as an Elder... and he was grateful to have conversation partners in the church where he learned about his faith."³ This is what tending the sheep is all about. This is what Christ calls us to. To be conversation partners. To make meaningful contributions. To walk along side each other.

Jesus asked, "Do you love me?". We answered, "Yes, Lord we love you". Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." We have fed the hungry from rich pastures, and given drink to the thirsty from springs that never run dry. The loaves and fishes have been plentiful. The grocery cart stocked for the food pantry. The soup bowls painted and auctioned for the food bank. The laces tightened as we faithfully walked to end hunger each year. We have traveled to feed and be fed by our siblings around the world. We have met new neighbors who have taught us and fed us as we fed and welcomed them. Our commitment to serving Christ through engaging with our neighbor, our community, and the world is a hallmark our faith at PCO. We will celebrate our commitment to that legacy this morning in our Minute for Mission. And lest we forget, we have fed each other, deepening relationships over coffee and snacks on Sunday mornings; sharing chili dinners at the church and dinners in each other's homes. I think it is telling that

³ Letter from Dr. Rob Carlson to the PCO congregation dated October 12, 2017.

just two weeks after PCO was chartered, the church held its first picnic in East Lansing Park on May 17, 1964.⁴

Friends, Jesus left the world in our care. We are his hands and feet; we are his voice. Jesus' asks each of us if we love him. And he tells each one of us, like Peter, what it means to answer "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." "Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep", Jesus tells us. For 60 years, PCO has been answering, "Yes, Jesus. We love you. Yes Jesus, we will follow you. We will feed your lambs; tend your sheep; and feed your sheep." And I am pretty confident that if we come back in 60 years, the answer will be the same. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Our togetherness in Christ makes us strong. Yes, Jesus. We love you. Join me in prayer.

⁴ PCO Time Line by Bobbie Dubyne and others.