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Isaiah 58: 6-9a & John 21: 9-19

Rooted & Engaged: Feed My Sheep

In the Gospel of John, the resurrection story ends with Mary Magdalene pronouncing, “I have seen the Lord” to the disciples. Later that night, the disciples gather in a locked house, afraid of retribution from the religious leaders. Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, **so I send you.**” Easter Sunday ends with a commission – we are sent out. A week later Jesus appeared to Thomas, who wasn’t with the disciples that first night, showing Thomas the wounds on his hand and side. Thomas recognized him as the Christ. The writer of the Gospel tells us that he shares these stories of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances so that we may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name. ¹

Our scripture this morning is the last of Jesus’ appearances to the disciples in the Gospel of John. While John tells us that Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not recorded in the Gospel, we are left with this beautiful story of our command - our call of what it means to follow the resurrected Christ in our lives. The disciples had gathered at the Sea of Tiberius (also known as the Sea of Galilee) to fish. After a long night of fishing they caught nothing. 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. We pick up the story here in John chapter 21, beginning at verse 9.

When they (that is the disciples) had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them, and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

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?”

¹ John 20:19-31

And Peter 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 the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

If you asked people in the church to describe Frank and Joe, you might hear terms like "sarcastic and sardonic, but loyal to the core" if folks were on their good side that day, or you might hear them referred to as "difficult", "too opinionated and sarcastic" and "as curmudgeons" if you were on their bad side. In my mind and memory, I think of them as prototypical "salty" New Englander men. Frank and Joe were life-long members of Center Congregational Church. This was the church which embraced me and nurtured me when I was a graduate student at the Univ. of Connecticut.

Like many New England churches that date to the late 1700's, the church stands on the center green in Manchester, CT and the head of Center St. in the small downtown. As the unhoused population grew during the recession of the late 1980's and early 1990's, Center Church members struggled with those who were unhoused gathering in the church facilities. The local shelter, just a few doors down from the church, closed at 7 am and the library and other businesses didn't open until afternoon on Sundays. When people were seeking respite from the raw New England winters, the church was an obvious place to gather. As discomfort grew amongst the worshipping community, the church formed a committee (because that's what churches do) to "solve the problem." I was part of that committee. I volunteered at the shelter and had a heart for vets – a lot of the unhoused at this time were veterans from the Vietnam War who were unable to readjust after their tours of duty or struggled with addiction and mental health challenges.

I have long since forgotten the name of the woman who chaired the committee, but I remember she was a social worker who specialized in the rights of those of who are differently abled. The committee had a number of long time church members who served on the Building and Grounds Committee, as it was called then, and remembered the days before the shelter was put on the Village Green. They remembered when Manchester was a thriving mill town – it was the center of the American silk industry from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century. Manchester had had some really good days. But like many New England mill towns, those days were long gone. Yet people remembered the proud history. So like many church committees the need for the Holy Spirit was great as this group assembled to "solve the problem of the unhoused" in the church on Sunday mornings. And like so many times in church history, the Holy Spirit showed up in a big way. I have no recollection of how it happened – one meeting or ten meetings, but somehow we moved from being a committee focused on protecting the building to being a committee focused on hospitality. We took on a

new name – the HOST Committee, HOST standing for Helping Others Stand Tall (HOST). And we took on a new ministry – serving a community breakfast between the two worship services. There was a suggested donation of \$1.00 for eggs, toast, breakfast potatoes and bottomless coffee. Perfect for a grad student. People paid what they could and we always seemed to have enough funds for the next week. And every week Joe and Frank opened the church early, went down to the basement kitchen, put the coffee on and cooked breakfast for everyone who showed up. I loved hanging out in the kitchen with them. They were old guys – or at least seemed old to an early 20-something. They welcomed me into their kitchen and regaled with me stories of past glories and sports trivia and town gossip and opinions on politicians – the kind of conversations of that happen in church kitchens across the country. I never saw Joe and Frank serve on a church committee, and honestly, while their wives were faithful attendees in worship, they rarely came to services. Yet I can think of no two disciples who embodied Jesus' call to follow him more than they did. They took Jesus' words to Peter very seriously and every Sunday they "fed the sheep."

Jesus asked Peter for the third time: "Simon son of John, do you love me?" And Peter said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." And as you might guess, Jesus wasn't just talking to Peter and wasn't just talking to the disciples on that lakeshore beach. Jesus was talking to all his disciples in every time and place, including those of us right here.

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. This is our call as disciples. Now if we were shepherds, and not the kind in the Christmas nativity pageant, we would understand that this call is an all-encompassing call, to care for our siblings, our neighbors, the world from birth to death. Jesus was calling his disciples 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. It is with our imperfections and through our imperfections that we follow Jesus.

I think about Peter and all of the feels he must have been having on that morning. He is likely thinking back to his betrayal after Jesus' arrest – how he denied knowing him three times before the cock crowed. How he did not believe when Mary Magdalene said that Jesus' burial tomb was empty and he had to go see for himself. How he had been afraid to walk on the water and how Jesus had calmed the storm and how Jesus had told them they would fish for people.

As the words of preparation from the Rev. John Buchanan share, "There's so much going on in [this] story that is familiar: Peter's embarrassment and disappointment in himself, for instance. There is no pain quite like publicly failing to live up to others' expectations and your

own. What Jesus does not say to Peter is as important as what he does say. It would have been natural for him to refer to Peter's spectacular failure, to ask for an apology, or at least to refer to the denial. I don't think I could have resisted doing that. What happens instead is grace, the pure, unconditional acceptance and love of God in Jesus Christ, and Peter's rebirth, restoration, redemption—salvation in charcoaled fish and a piece of toast. There are no conditions, but there is a commission."²

A commission. We have been commissioned. We have been commissioned to feed as we have been fed. Throughout scripture the stories of wheat and vine tell the story of our faith. From the manna – the bread of heaven – that fed the Israelites as these wandered in the dessert, free from slavery, yet not home in Canaan; to the widow in Zarephath who made cake for the prophet Elijah to the miracle of the wedding feast at Cana when Jesus changes water into wine; to the feeding of the 5,000 with a few loaves and fish. And that Passover night when the disciples shared a Last Supper together.

These are our stories; our stories of sacred moments when God's love and providence have been poured out and we have been fed. Jesus knew that for the disciples to carry God's mission of spreading love and grace to legions of people who were pushed to the margins of society; to carry the mission of transforming fear into hope and a mindset of scarcity into abundance; to share the good news that the bonds of sin and death have been broken by Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection from death ... for all of this work that lay ahead of the disciples, they needed to be fed. So Jesus fed them breakfast that morning on that lakeshore. And told them likewise to feed the lambs and sheep that made up his flock. They were commissioned. In a few minutes we will commission a team heading to the Simbolei Academy for Girls. Next week we will commission those participating in our Intergenerational Mission Week. We will take seriously our call to feed the sheep as we work to address hunger issues at the Community Garden at Edgewood Village and Okemos Community Pantry. We will take seriously our call to feed the sheep as we construct a Prayer Path here at PCO that will nurture our souls. Do you love me more than these things of the world, Jesus asked? Then "feed my sheep." May it be so. Amen. Join me in prayer.

² John Buchanan. Windblown. What does the resurrection story mean? *Christian Century*, May 2, 2006; Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2006-05/windblown>