

## FEEDING THE SHEEP

Text: John 21:15-19  
LHUMC 4/21/13

### I. Introduction

A. Today we rejoin the disciples and Jesus at their breakfast on the beach.

1. Remember last week that the disciples had been out on the lake for a spectacularly unsuccessful fishing expedition, and along came the risen Christ with some new instructions about where they needed to cast their nets.
2. And because they followed those instructions, their catch suddenly was overflowing.
3. Now, having dragged the nets out of the water, they notice that somehow, Jesus has already rustled up a charcoal fire, (which always astounds me as one who can't get a bonfire going to save my life).
4. Maybe there was some handy driftwood laying around, but knowing Jesus, maybe not.
5. And on this mysteriously appearing fire are fish—and again, where they came from, we're not sure either, but there they are.
6. All in all, one of the more miraculous beach parties of all time.
7. And what we find out today as they sit down to eat is that those fish weren't the only things being grilled that morning.
8. For what ensues between Peter and Jesus can only be described as a different kind of grilling.

II. As Jesus begins to question Peter, I've always had a couple of reactions.

A. The first is the more "knee-jerk", less mature reaction as I put myself in Peter's place. As the questioning begins, I'm thinking that Peter might be thinking something like this:

1. "Oh, man, I hate it when this happens".
2. "Here I am sitting down to a nice breakfast on the beach—one I didn't even have to prepare, and Jesus just won't let me relax and enjoy myself."
3. I'm not entirely sure about Peter, but I know when I'm at a beach party, I'm not sure I want Jesus to show up and ask me tough questions about my faith.
4. But if nothing else, this beach party reminds us that you never know when Jesus might intrude on a good time.

5. I actually remember a time in my own life that was a little like that—when I was a teenager our family took a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the Virgin Islands, and I remember on that first morning going down the path from our hotel to the beach and noticing this big high fence along the path that went all the way to the beach. It wasn't until we got down to the water that we noticed why the fence was there—to separate the land owned by the hotel from the shacks inhabited by the local people on the hillside on the other side. All of which served to sort of temper our own good time at the beach, when you were sort of forced to confront the difference between our situation with those on the other side of the fence. It wasn't quite as much fun after that. And in retrospect, I realize that Jesus was kind of there, asking questions.
  6. Has Jesus ever broken in on your “beach party”? It's not as much fun after that, is it?
  7. The natural first reaction is, “Not now, Jesus, I'm trying to have a good time here!”
- B. So that's one possible reaction. On the more positive side, there is another way to interpret Jesus' questioning of Peter. You could look at it as a “grilling of grace.”
1. To understand this one, you might ask yourself this question—Did Peter deserve another chance?
  2. Remember he was the one at the last supper to say to Jesus, “Oh no, Jesus, I'll never deny you.”
  3. And then what does he proceed to do?—he denies him not once, not twice, but three times.
  4. And like today on the beach, he got the same question three times.
  5. At that point the question was “Aren't you one of those who was with him?”, and he answered wrong all three times.
  6. Would you have given him a second chance?
  7. It's a little like being a teacher and having a student who flunks the final exam—not just flunks it, but gets a zero. Would you give him a re-take?
  8. Show me that teacher, and I'll show you one who on the one hand will be the one who everyone wants to take a class from, and on the other hand, will have a hard time getting tenure. I think the term they use these days is “grade inflation”.
  9. But understand, that is basically what Jesus was doing. He still had hopes that this bumbling, impulsive, always speaks-before-he-thinks, fair-weather kind of guy could be the rock upon which the

church was to be built. So there on the beach, he gives him a re-take.

10. So I hope you see how that applies—even when we spectacularly flunk Discipleship 101 and deny Jesus up one side and down the other in whatever ways, we need to remember that if Jesus could give Peter a re-take, he might just make the same offer to us.

11. It doesn't mean the questions are any easier the next time, because when you deny Jesus, it can be really hard to answer him when he comes back at us somehow with the question that he came back at Peter with—"Do you love me?"

12. And when we have flunked in the discipleship test before, that is certainly not as simple a question as it might seem. Regret and guilt can make that a really hard question.

13. And the reality is that Jesus has ways in which he keeps asking that question just like he did with Peter. It may be in a situation that arises where we are presented with a choice of whether we serve him or not, or forgive someone or not, or reach out to someone or not.

14. Jesus has amazing ways of asking that question. And we quickly learn it is not always a simple question. Which leads to my next thoughts.

III. What we find out in the next part of the story is that when Jesus asks us whether we love him or not, simply saying "yes" isn't enough. So not only is the question not as simple as it may seem, apparently Jesus isn't looking for a simple answer either. You might say that when Jesus asks us whether we love him, his expectation is that that is an essay question. And actually, that's probably true of any question that Jesus may ask us. There are no multiple choice or true-or-false questions when it comes to the discipleship exam that we take every day. If only discipleship was that easy.

A. Have you ever noticed that Jesus gives three different responses to Peter's "yes"? If you read the story too quickly, that's easy to miss. As I've pondered that, and pondered that like any good rabbinic teacher, Jesus always chose his words carefully, I've come to realize there is power in the nuances.

1. After Peter's first answer of "Of course I love you, Jesus", Jesus says, "Feed my lambs."

a) This is "feeding my lambs". (picture)

b) The lambs are the cutest ones, the most vulnerable ones, the ones who appreciate it the most.

- c) The lambs are the ones, when we feed them, when we serve them, we come away feeling really good. (About ourselves, about God, about serving God).
  - d) In the lambs, it is easiest to see the face of Jesus, to know that when we feed them, we are feeding Jesus himself.
  - e) After all, in Revelation and elsewhere in the Bible, it says very clearly that Jesus is the Lamb sent from God just for us.
  - f) So of the three responses, it's kind of interesting that Jesus gives Peter the easiest directions first.
  - g) Even someone who just denied Jesus can feed his lambs. It's so rewarding, it's even fun.
  - h) So it's kind of like starting the final exam re-take with the question "what is two plus two".
2. The second response raises the stakes a little bit. After Peter's second "of course", Jesus says, "Well, if you really love me, then tend my sheep."
- a) As someone who spent quite a bit of time around sheep when I was growing up on my grandparents' farm, I know there is a difference between "feeding" and "tending".
  - b) "Feeding" can be rewarding, "feeding" can be a kind of one-shot deal.
  - c) "Tending sheep" brings to mind things like cleaning out pens, and perhaps other less-pleasant, less-rewarding jobs.
  - d) "Tending" sheep, however you picture it, is caring for them over the long haul.
  - e) "Tending" sheep means we step right into daily life with Jesus' sheep, that we are with them all along their journey, not just at feeding time.
  - f) In the life of the church, "tending sheep" means that we don't just take an offering for something or someone, but we share our other gifts by serving on the front lines for and with those folks and doing it for the long haul.
3. And then finally, as if Peter hasn't already heard him, and notice Peter gets a little exasperated with Jesus, because after all, he's answered him two times already, Jesus responds to Peter's "of course I love you" with "Feed my sheep." Again, the nuances are everything.
- a) And again, from experience I know there is a difference between feeding lambs and feeding sheep.
  - b) One summer it was my job to feed the sheep—every day.

- c) And what happens when sheep figure out that you are their main and only source of food?—well, they can get a little annoying sometimes.
- d) It got so that I couldn't get within 50 feet of the fence of the pen where the sheep were without them running up wondering where the food was.
- e) I remember when we'd play baseball, my cousins would make me climb the fence to get the ball when it would wind up in the sheep pen, because they thought it was so hilarious to watch me get mobbed by the sheep.
- f) And so I know that to feed sheep can be a whole different animal than feeding lambs (no pun intended).
- g) Feeding sheep is hard work. Feeding sheep isn't always that rewarding. But feeding sheep is something that is needed, because that sheep needs the food as much as the cutest lamb. And the sheep need us just as much as the lambs.
- h) They may just not be as appreciative. They are the ones who may or may not say thank you when you feed them.
- i) And in that sheep-filled culture of first-century Palestine, I'm sure both Jesus and Peter knew what it was like to feed sheep. They knew that that might have been the hardest of the three responses for Peter to fulfill if he was really going to rock upon the church was built.

IV. Conclusion—But enough about sheep.

- A. Notice too that Jesus ends the exam re-take with the hardest instructions of all. Those two words that describe in timeless fashion what it means to be a disciple, what it means to be a shepherd—he says, “Follow me”.
- B. We heard the familiar words of Psalm 23 earlier because there is probably no better passage that describes what Jesus our shepherd does for us. How he feeds us, how he tends us, even at those times when we are the most annoying of sheep.
- C. Here are the reminders:
  1. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” In other words, this shepherd tends to our needs.
  2. “He leads me beside still waters, he leads me down the right paths.” In other words, he leads us to where we need to go to be the best sheep we can be.
  3. “His rod and his staff, they comfort us”. In other words, even when we are in the darkest valleys, he comforts us.

- D. In all of his responses to Peter and to us, Jesus is calling to follow him, specifically to be the kind of shepherd for others that he already is for us.
- E. So when you get a little lost, when you feel a little burned out, when the sheep get a little annoying, keep reading Psalm 23 not just as a reminder of what a shepherd does, but also what our great shepherd still does for us.
- F. And finally, never forget that in this great grilling of grace at the end of John 21, Jesus reminds us that no matter what we have done or haven't done in the past, we are never excluded from new opportunities to follow him, to feed and tend his sheep, to be the kind of shepherds that he calls us to be.
- G. Thanks be to God for this great shepherd, thanks be to God for all the opportunities he gives us to be that same kind of shepherd.

