

Sept 15      Feed My Sheep

John 21:12-17

Today we have the final time Jesus and Peter meet. Had the crucifixion been the end of Jesus' story, it surely would have been the end of Peter's story. Most likely, he would have returned to Galilee and his fishing business. Peter would have been lost to history. What happened to transform Peter, moving him from cowardice to unshakable courage? Peter had to meet Jesus and deal with his denials. The hardest thing Peter had to do was confront his mistakes. This intimate moment between Peter and the now resurrected Christ is shared with the church because it asks us, "Where do we need to come to terms with our past so we can grow into a new future?"

There are parallels between this meeting and the time they met when Jesus called Peter to be a disciple. The parallels are more than coincidence. Just like that first time, Peter is fishing with some of the others and after a night of hard work had caught nothing. A figure, not named as Jesus, asks if they caught anything. When they say no he says "Cast your nets on the right side." A whole school of fish were caught. As they were hauling in the fish, John realized it was Jesus on the shore. We are not sure what it was that caused this recognition but he tells Peter. Peter immediately jumped out of the boat and headed towards Jesus. He couldn't wait for the boat to get to shore. Even though he knew this meeting might be emotionally painful he ran towards Jesus. He wanted to be close to his dear friend and teacher. He wanted to assure himself that Jesus was risen from the dead. Do you hear the love, the longing in that action of jumping into the water? It shows that he was ready to deal with his past actions.

We need to backtrack a bit. On the day of resurrection, Mary was told by the risen Christ to tell the disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of them into Galilee. These words must have given Peter hope that despite his denials he was still wanted. Jesus is always reaching out to us to let us know that we are loved and wanted.

Before we get to that encounter I want us to ponder, "Why had Peter and the others gone back to fishing?" Was it because they didn't know what to do and so decided to earn a little money? Was it because they thought their time of being a

disciple was over? Was it guilt that they had failed Jesus and they felt that he probably didn't want to see them again? We don't know, but their actions symbolize human nature. When we are unsure about the future, our first response is often to go back to something safe, and known. It might not be the best option but it is one that we know and that feels comforting.

Here is a little interesting note that Adam Hamilton shared. John says that Jesus had lit a charcoal fire while waiting for them. The only other time that word is used is when Peter was warming himself at a charcoal fire outside the high priests house. It seems as if John was pointing back to that moment of shame.

Jesus says to Simon bring some of the fish that you have just caught. Simon went and drew the net to shore. The word "drew" in Greek is the same word John uses when Jesus spoke of drawing people to him. It is the last time that we know of that Peter will fish. We also are soon to learn that the one who was called to be a fisher of men is about to be given a new title.

Now let us look at that moment. They had finished their meal when Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. When Jesus asked Simon if he loved him it could be that Jesus was referring to that fateful night when Simon said that he loved Jesus more than the other disciples. This time, Peter didn't suggest that he loved Jesus more than the others. He did say that he loved Jesus.

Three times Simon had denied Jesus. Three times Jesus asked for his love and loyalty, feeling Simon squirm a bit while wrestling with his denial. Three times Jesus reaffirmed his call for Simon to be the Rock. Jesus' questions would have been uncomfortable at any time but was even more so because it took place in front of the other disciples. The questions forced Peter to deal with his past denial of Jesus. Something that does not seem to have happened up to this point. There is power in the process of confession and penance leading to authentic reconciliation. The bold Peter is gone. His last words of, "you know Lord I love you" are done with great humility. Faith humbles us but it also teaches us. In humility he was fully opening himself to whatever came next.

After each affirmation Jesus says to Peter to feed his sheep or to tend to his lambs. The fisher of men is now being appointed shepherd of the flock. The title of shepherd is one Jesus had used for himself. Now he is asking Peter to take on that role. In humility and love Peter was ready to take Jesus' place as leader of the group.

Jesus makes our love for him simple. If we love Jesus we are to feed his sheep and care for his lambs. Care for others is our call. We are to confess when we have failed. We are each, at times, the sheep in need of care and we are at other times called to be Simon and feed and care for Jesus' sheep and lambs. And we know this means all, for all are beloved of God.

The big take away from this encounter, for me, is that God does not define us by our failures. Jesus saw all the good that was in Peter. He had shown so many times rock solid faith. He was respected by the others. He was the one who was willing to step out in faith. Yes, he had stumbled big time, but Jesus trusted him, trusted Peter so much that he was willing to place his teachings in his hands. He was to become the good shepherd.

Too often, when I look back at my life all I see are the mistakes. They embarrass me and humble me. I wonder, at times, could God really forgive that? Or, when God looks at my life does he see that first of all?

Then I am reminded of Peter. Right after his resurrection Jesus was assuring Peter that he still cared about him. Later he made Peter confront his mistakes, that is a part of repentance, but then he moved forward. He let the past be past and pointed Peter to the future. We will talk about that more next week.

So know this, God does not look for your mistakes. God looks at the entirety of your life. God sees the goodness in your heart, the faith that you have. Yes, there might be some moments where you need to confess before moving forward but our God is a God of grace, love and forgiveness.

So think about your life. Are you needing to ask for forgiveness? Are you doubting God's love and grace? Are you uncertain that this grace should be for others? Peter reminds us to be open, to confess and to welcome this grace for us and for all.

And remember, when we get worried about what it means to be faithful, or what choice we are to make, recall Peter's commission. It is ours as well. We are to feed God's lambs, take care of God's sheep, love and forgive, as we are loved and forgiven. Do that, and God says, "It is enough. It will be well with your soul."