

# *Loving, Feeding & Following*

by

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John 21:15-29

<sup>15</sup>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.” <sup>16</sup>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.” <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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.” <sup>19</sup>(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

<sup>20</sup>Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” <sup>21</sup>When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus,

“Lord, what about him?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” <sup>23</sup>So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” <sup>24</sup>This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. <sup>25</sup>But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Today’s reading is Part Two of the two-part resurrection appearance at the end of John’s gospel. Last Sunday we considered how the resurrection of Jesus is about what happened to him, but it is also about what happens to us. His resurrection transforms us and propels us into a life of discipleship, moving us from profound considerations of how God is with us always to what that means for us as disciples of Jesus.

Today’s conversation between Peter and the Risen Christ is a beautiful testimony of this kind of transformation. Peter and the others have returned to business as usual by going fishing; they fish all night long and catch nothing. The Risen Christ appears on the beach and tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and they come up with a haul of fish so heavy they cannot lift the net into the boat. They recognize Jesus as the one instructing them from the beach beside a charcoal fire and inviting them to breakfast.

Before we get to Peter’s commissioning here to feed the sheep of the Good Shepherd, the gospel calls us to remember something. You remember the last time Peter was found standing beside a charcoal fire. It was the night of Jesus’ arrest and betrayal. The gospel tells us that night was cold and the police made a charcoal fire near the gate of the High Priest’s courtyard, and Peter was warming himself beside the fire when he denied knowing Jesus three times. So in today’s reading a new day has dawned with profound significance.

Peter who once stood beside a charcoal fire on that night of desertion and failure and a three-fold denial, now stands beside another charcoal fire. He is given a new three-fold opportunity to profess his love for Jesus. In the morning light of the resurrection, Jesus asks, “Simon Peter, do you love me?” Perhaps it is worth noting that Jesus does not say, “Where were you on the worst night of my life?” or “How can I trust you won’t deny me again?” Jesus asks for no apology; he has no need to remind Peter of his guilt; he simply offers the gift of a new opportunity, a renewed commitment to follow him. “Yes, Lord, you know I love you,” Peter gets to say three times, thereby reversing those three earlier denials and thus undoing them. Professor of Spirituality, Margaret Guenther, called this scene “the sacrament of the second chance.”<sup>1</sup>

By the power of resurrection, Peter is offered a new chance in his relationship with Jesus, a wide open future for service, one in which Peter is not only forgiven, but also given a fresh challenge, a new work to do – indeed a share in Jesus’ own work: “Feed my lambs... tend my sheep... feed my sheep.” Here we see clearly how the ministry of Jesus Christ is entrusted to forgiven disciples, to less than perfect people, who take upon ourselves the new life we have received: loving God, feeding his sheep and thereby following Jesus.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright as observed: “Here is the secret of all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay and ordained, full-time and part-time. It is the secret of everything from being a quiet, back-row member of a prayer group to being a platform speaker at huge rallies and conferences. If you are going to do any single solitary thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is what it’s built on. Somewhere, deep down inside, there is a love for Jesus, and though – goodness knows – you (like Peter) have let him down enough times, he wants to find that love, to give you a chance to express it, to heal the hurts and failures of the past, and give you new work to do.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David B. Jackson, “Second Chances, *The Christian Century*, July-August, 1997, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part Two*, p. 165.

Friends, we are being given this resurrection work to do at this moment in history. Along with the pandemic and its companion unemployment is an escalating hunger crisis. Just now, more than one in five households in the United States, is suffering food insecurity. That's two in five households of mothers with children twelve-years-old and younger.<sup>3</sup> Georgetown University Law Professor, David Super, said recently, "In addition to the sudden disappearance of jobs, our other defenses against hunger are collapsing. Tens of millions of low-income children have lost access to lunch now that schools are closed."<sup>4</sup>

The global crisis of world hunger is also staggering. According to the United Nations World Food Program, the coronavirus pandemic "now threatens to detonate an unprecedented global humanitarian catastrophe. Millions of civilians living in conflict scarred nations will be further pushed to the brink of starvation. Already one hundred thirty-five million people in the world face acute food shortages. It is estimated that with the pandemic, that number could likely double to two hundred sixty-five million people facing starvation by the end of this year."<sup>5</sup>

Friends, our job today is as specific and as literal as Jesus' instruction to Peter: Feed my sheep. *Loving* God means *feeding* God's children means *following* Jesus. I know this is a difficult time to live out this call because we are not able to go to the places we normally go when trying to alleviate hunger in our community. However, financial gifts to our church's Hunger Fund are up and still need increased support.

The money you are contributing to the church's mission and stewardship is supporting our usual partners like the Urban Tree Connection which is giving all their farm shares to families in their community. The church is also supporting new food distribution locations like the Pop-up at the Common

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<sup>3</sup> Brookings.edu, 5/6/2020.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Blow, "The Hunger Pains of a Pandemic," *New York Times*, 5/10/2020.

<sup>5</sup> Abdi Latif Dahir, "Instead of Coronavirus, the Hunger Will Kill Us: A Global Food Crisis Looms," *New York Times*, 5/6/2020.

Place. We are collecting your spare garden tools to help our partner congregation, Bethel AME, equip their home gardeners. Lower Merion school students who depend on the school lunch program are having meals delivered to them if there is no adult to pick them up. And there will be more opportunities this summer to engage this need if the school district cannot continue offering meals.

Our Easter faith entails doing for others what Jesus has done for us. Like the disciple Peter before us, after we are nourished and tended by him, Jesus calls us to feed his other sheep. It will always involve many forms of discipleship: watching over people, listening to them, protecting them, praying with them, housing them, and helping in difficult times. It will always also involve feeding those who do not have enough to eat.

We are all tired of this pandemic, but most of us are tired of it surrounded by shelves of books, movies to watch, and the technology to join in worship, and weekly outings to the grocery store. While two-hundred and sixty-five million people are facing starvation.

After today's Benediction, you will see a link to the Giving page of our church website. I encourage you to find the Hunger Fund on the list of giving opportunities and to give as you are able and as you feel called.

The Risen Christ is among us asking us to feed his sheep and tend his lambs. Your generous response will be a bold act of loving, feeding and following Jesus.

AMEN.