



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MAY 11, 2014
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

What Matters Acts 2:42-47; John 21:1-19

It is John's last entry in a Gospel packed with fascinating stories. And, while John does not record nearly as many miracles as do the other three gospel writers, he does include this last one. Miracles abound in the Gospels: turning water into wine, healings, raising Lazarus and two others from death, walking on water, stilling a storm—and those are all before the resurrection. Since Jesus walked out of the tomb (a major miracle itself), Jesus has appeared and disappeared, navigated through closed windows and locked doors, and, here, found the best fishing spot.

If we think about them, we have to admit that miracles are difficult to believe simply because they defy the way we know the world to operate. Some people don't spend a lot of time thinking about miracles, but should. Some people get tripped up over miracles and can't believe. Miracles create a great tension in our faith which can be positive or negative.

That is one reason I like John's final story. The resurrection had occurred and the disciples had seen Jesus—some of them at least twice. They knew he was alive, but at this point, they did not know where he was or what he was up to. Apparently some of them had returned home to Galilee. No doubt they talked a lot about what was next for them. I imagine them sitting around, perhaps in Peter's house, speculating on when and where Jesus would show up next, when a lull paused the conversation. Everything that needed to be said had been said and no one had anything else to say. Suddenly Peter jumped to his feet and announced, "I'm going fishing!" That sounded like a good idea for a bunch of fishermen, so they gathered up their gear, dragged the boat to the shore, and pushed off into the water.

How good it must have felt to rock on the gentle waves of the sea and feel that fresh breeze in their faces! It had been three years since they had cast a net, but you never forget how to do what you love. The excitement of the trip cleared their heads and the motions of their work woke up their muscles. It was good to be back on the water.

They fished all night, but their nets were empty. Now, anybody who fishes with any regularity knows that there are times when you don't catch a thing. Last Monday, Wayne Cotton took Dan Herring and me rock fishing up at Weldon. Dan and Wayne immediately caught fish—big fish. Eventually I got in the game, but it took a while. I know how the disciples felt. Still, as Wayne's daddy used to say, "A bad day on the water is better than a good day in the office." Despite their lack of fish, the disciples were happy to be back in the boat.

They fished at night to avoid the heat of the day and, at daybreak, as they were preparing to go ashore, they saw a man on the beach. He called out to see if they had had any luck and, when they answered, "No!", he suggested that they try throwing their nets on the right side of the boat.

Immediately the nets filled with fish so that they could not haul them into the boat. John told Peter that the man on the shore was Jesus and Peter threw on his clothes, jumped into the water, and swam to shore. The others hauled in the fish which John numbered at 153—and large ones at that! Clearly John was a true fisherman! Tired and hungry, Jesus fed them all breakfast. It was a good day. And it is a great story, but is it just a fisherman's tale?

The rest of the story reminds us not to get distracted by the miracles Jesus performed but to remain focused on what he called us to do. Jesus and Peter took a stroll down the beach and Jesus asked him, "Do you love me more than these?" Granted it was an odd question for Jesus never quantified love or pitted one disciple against another. It was an uncomfortable moment because Peter knew (and we know) that it was a trick question. There was really only one answer just as with those other tricky questions such as "Do I look like I have gained weight?" or "How do I look in this outfit?" "Do you love me?" "Of course, Jesus. I love you." "Then feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed my sheep."

Without question, Peter remembered the time—or perhaps many times—when Jesus told them that he was the Good Shepherd: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . . I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:11, 16). "Feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed my sheep."

There is no mystery to what Jesus was doing here. There were no tricks up his sleeve, no dramatic disappearing acts, no more miracles. It was Jesus and Peter face to face, heart to heart. “Do you love me? Then take care of my sheep.” John offers us the heart of the Gospel, the life to which we are all called, the exercise of our faith: take care of my sheep.

Yesterday Noel Castellanos, Director of the Christian Community Development Association, spoke to a diverse group of about 125 citizens concerned about the current condition of our community. He reminded us that the overarching message of the Gospel is that humanity and God were brought together through Jesus who became the linchpin uniting Creator and created by means of the cross. That is what we celebrated on Easter and every Sunday of the year. But Mr. Castellanos also reminded us that the life of the Gospel, the true fulfillment of the promise of God, is what he called “the Good News of the Kingdom of God.”¹ It may have been three days from the cross to the garden, three days from death to resurrection, three days from defeat to victory, three days from despair to joy, but Jesus spent thirty-three years on this earth. During those years he lived as we live. He experienced our lives day by day. He shared in all the delights, surprises, happiness, struggles, grief, failures, tragedies, and hopes that are ours. For thirty years he lived as one of us. For three years he walked from village to village, from person to person, listening to their concerns, feeding their hunger, meeting their needs, doing all that he could to fulfill the promise of God which he expressed in these words: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Life abundant, full and complete, this is the promise to all of God’s people and the call issued to each of us through Simon Peter: “Feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed my sheep.” Christ restores our relationship with God through his selflessness on the cross. We respond to God’s grace by loving one another as God in Christ has loved us.

Jesus told Peter that if the disciple who had denied him truly loved him, he would demonstrate that love by caring for other people. We might quibble over some of Jesus’ miracles, but no one can argue with the compassion Jesus demonstrated and the care he offered. He fed, he healed, he listened, he taught, he forgave, he encouraged, he transformed life for everyone he met. Ultimately he demonstrated his love on the cross and in the garden of

¹Noel Castellanos, “Christian Community Development Overview,” *A Forum on Making Neighborhoods Whole*, Community Coalition of Eastern North Carolina, May 10, 2014, Rocky Mount, NC.

resurrection. We cannot deny what he did for us, nor can we deny the call for us to do the same for one another.

We don't see many shepherds anymore. They still exist and do what they have done for millennia, but they are not as much a part of our lives as they were in Jesus' day. Mothers, however, are still around and daily exhibit the kind of care and concern that Jesus was urging upon Peter.

Jesus' own mother is a remarkable example of selfless love. From the beginning of her story, she endured the stigma and shame of her pregnancy in order to fulfill her calling to love the world through the gift of her son. She nurtured Jesus and her other children, teaching them about life, guiding them through their struggles, imparting the faith that would shape who they would become. When the time came, she shared him with the world, even if reluctantly, and when he was unjustly crucified, she was by his side until the horrendous end. Not only as a child, but throughout his life, Mary cared for and nurtured Jesus so that he could be what God intended him to be.

That is shepherding love. It is not always easy or convenient or inexpensive. It takes time and energy and resources, especially the resources of the heart. Tending and feeding sheep is a full-time job, but tending to and feeding the bodies, minds, and souls of children is a life-time job. It is a calling. It is the work of love.

That is the work Jesus called Peter—and every one of us—to do. “Feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed my sheep.” It is a life-time calling to look after one another and our world. It is the work that makes the Kingdom of God evident all around us. Quite frankly, it is miraculous work.

Do you remember when we, along with other churches in the city, hosted the Interfaith Housing Network? It was about a dozen or so years ago. The purpose was to provide safe lodging for homeless families while the Bassett Center was being built. I don't know that I have ever seen such excitement and enthusiasm within our congregation as when we prepared the Youth Building each week that we hosted families. Some of you moved furniture and set up cots so that each family had its own bedroom. Some of you prepared food and ate meals with the families. Others of you washed clothes, helped with homework, assisted with errands, and even spent the night so that local families could be safe and enjoy something of a normal life. Certainly it felt good to be doing something as helpful as providing safe shelter, but the real benefit was getting to know people in our community

whose paths we would never cross otherwise. The blessing was sharing a meal or talking about family or hearing the dreams of a child and discovering that they were the same as those of our children. The gift of that experience was that we were involved in the lives of people who needed us at that moment. We were shepherds tending the Jesus' sheep.

We are called to hands-on ministry, involvement with others of God's children. We are his sheep and so are they. We need God's love and so do they. When we minister to one another, all of us are loved and our deepest needs are met.

Do you love me? A tricky question to be certain, but it will help us to determine what matters most in life. It is an important question for the answer will lead us down risky paths and through unfamiliar pastures to take care of our sisters and brothers who need us. The miracle is that they might just be answering the same question and find their way to meet our needs as well.

At the end of John's story in which we have witnessed miracle and calling, Jesus offers a final invitation to Peter: "Follow me." Those same words were the first invitation he offered three years before when their journey began—also at the seashore. John reminds us that it is not the miracles, the fantastic aspects of the faith that matter the most, what matters is our response to that simple invitation: Follow me. If we do follow, it will be to love one another as God in Christ has loved us. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks. "Then follow me." Amen.

May 11, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Although it is seldom that we even see sheep nowadays and rare to know an actual shepherd, we still resonate with the notion that you are our Good Shepherd, O God. We understand what it means to be watched over, looked after, guided, and protected by One who cares for us and desires the best for us. We are grateful to be under your watchful care, O God, and for all of the ways in which you shepherd us.

We do need someone to watch over us for life can be tricky and dangerous at times. We need you to help us choose the paths we will take so that we remain on safe ground and find our way to nurturing pastures. We need you to protect us from the many dangers that seem to lurk at our doors, the temptations that constantly nip at our heels, and the challenges that confront us at many turns. We need your guidance when the doors of life open wide to us so that we will choose wisely which way we will go. Keep us safe and guard us with the staff of your love so that we are never alone.

Remind us each day that your fold includes our world which, on some days, looks dangerous and feels hopeless. We grieve over hurtful and deadly tragedies. Our hearts ache over the inhuman things some people do to others. We worry when disagreements escalate into conflicts and conflicts flare up into war. We agonize over the ways in which we argue over the health of our planet and ignore the ingenuity and resources we have to improve life for everyone. Help us, O God, to live together in peace.

Every day, but certainly on this day, we thank you for the love of mothers who nurture us throughout life. We are grateful for the gift of life, for the care given to our development, for the encouragement offered in uncertain times, and for the unfailing affection which remains with us throughout life. We ask for your blessing upon our mothers and all mothers. We pray for those who have struggled for the health and well-being of a child, for those who have had to give up a child far too early, and for those who were not equipped in whatever way to be the mother they wanted to be. We pray also for all who, for whatever reasons, have missed out on a mother's love and thank you for the numerous people who filled that void. Above all, O God, we thank you for the prayers offered by all mothers which have sought to keep us all safe and in your care.

Thank you, God, for caring for us even when we do not know how to care for ourselves. Teach us how to love one another and thus faithfully follow you. Bless us, O Shepherd of our heart, with grace and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.