

Sermon: Love me? Feed my sheep.
Text: John 21:1-19

Reverend Nancy J. White
The Elijah Kellogg Congregational Church
Delivered: April 18, 2010

Last week in the scripture passage immediately preceding this one in John 20, we heard Jesus say to the faith community, “Peace be with you.”

The conventional greeting given by Jesus for his followers. And yet when given by the Risen Christ it became more - the assurance of God’s peace, presence and love for the journey they were to undertake in the name of Jesus. Then Jesus further tells them to go : “As the Father has sent me, so send I you.” Jesus then breathed the Holy Spirit on to them – wow what a powerful image. Jesus breathed the very breath of God on the faith community to empower them for the journey - for the ‘sending’. He told them to continue the ministry he had started – a ministry of love for all people. He told them this ministry was now theirs and he equipped them with God’s peace and the power of the Holy Spirit so that they might carry on.

So Jesus sent them to redeem the lost, to share God’s love, to care for those who could not care for themselves, to proclaim the Good News that Christ is risen and eternal life is theirs and they go... they go fishing that is!

So the disciples are out in their boats fishing but are having a really bad fish day – their nets are empty, they are catching nothing – not one single fish! They see a person standing on the shore (they don’t recognize that it is Jesus even though they have all seen him risen just a few days past) and he says to them – “Children you have no fish, have you?” They answer “no”. Can you imagine this exchange today? They’ve been out there all night, they’ve tried every which way they know how and they haven’t caught a thing – they are experienced fishermen and yet they can’t catch a single fish - they are tired and frustrated and I imagine just a little testy. So here’s some guy on the shore making small talk – how’re the fish biting today? catch anything? whatcha using for bait? And then he tells them to merely try the other side of the boat – duh! Like they haven’t already done that! And even though they’ve already tried everything, they do as he suggests and throw the nets off the other side of the boat and to their amazement they now have so many fish they can’t even haul in the net.

And suddenly they realize who is telling them how to fish! It is the Lord! Peter is so excited that he is torn between his natural instinct to rush to him and proper decorum of being clothed appropriately. Hastily throwing on a garment, Peter jumps into the water to reach Jesus as quickly as he can. Jesus has a nice little cook fire with fish already sizzling, he invites them to bring some of what they have just caught and they all enjoy a meal of fish and bread together. They now have no doubt that this is the Lord hosting their breakfast.

After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Jesus asks, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these disciples?” Peter responds, Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus tells him “Feed my lambs”. And then a second time Jesus asks him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter replies, “yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus tells him, “Tend my sheep.” Then a 3rd time, Jesus asks him “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Hurt and exasperated, Peter replies “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus tells him, “Feed my sheep.”

Why does Jesus repeat his question three times? Most scholars say that this corresponds to the three times Peter denied knowing Jesus the night he was betrayed. Let’s look at another side of it as well. It’s like trying to explain something to someone who just isn’t getting it either because they don’t want to, or they don’t understand it or they don’t hear well, or they are being purposely obtuse. Just days previously Jesus has given them God’s peace, empowered them with the Holy Spirit and sent them out to continue the ministry or teaching and healing and loving that he started and they’ve gone fishing! Did they not understand what he meant?

So he asks them repeatedly so that they can’t miss the meaning of the message. Love me? feed my lambs! Love me? tend to my sheep! Love me? take care of my sheep! Loving the Lord is directly connected to caring for those God cares for. Love the Lord, love all of God’s children in the way that God loves – unconditionally and with more than enough love to go around.

They have been given the power of the Holy Spirit and yet when they go off fishing on their own, their nets come up empty. When they follow the instructions of their Risen Lord, they have more fish than they are able to haul.

Do we ever go off on our own not following God’s instructions? We have been promised the peace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit for doing God’s work here on earth. Why does it sometimes seem like our nets come up empty? Perhaps we are not doing what God has asked us to do. Or we are trying to do it under our own power and not God’s. Perhaps we are too caught up in the business of everyday life that we miss what it is God is asking/telling us to do.

This week I received an inspiring letter from a colleague, the pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in South Boston. His letter describes that they are “aspiring to heed God’s call ‘to serve as a beacon of hope in the community’” by developing an array of programs to support families. Neighborhood kids have a wonderful theatre program, local teens are holding public meetings to engage their state representative and senator, (these same teens worked with the congregation last fall to increase voter turnout by 30%), they organize groceries for 300 families, are starting a substance abuse recovery group; there are new men’s groups, prayer and meditation groups, and teen mentoring among other programs. Bursting at the seams as they were meeting a great need with this ministry, they purchased the building next door with a \$400K mortgage – they did this by trusting that God would provide - this is a huge leap of faith for a poor church in an impoverished area – thanks be to God!

We do not live in South Boston, nor do I think God is calling us to duplicate what is being done at this South Boston church. But I do think we should be aspiring to heed God's call to serve as a beacon of hope in the community – in our community of Harpswell Maine.

Do we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us onto new paths of ministry? Do we take time to discern God's will for us? either individually or as a church? Or are we so involved in the tangible parts of church life that to take time to just sit in God's presence seems like fluff? A speaker at a conference I went to in January spoke about whether or not meetings of the church should be run by Robert's Rules of Order. While they are useful and have their place, the speaker proposed that the church has let this tool take over the place of allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us in all that we do as God's children. We allow little or no time for prayer, discernment or the study of scripture in our meetings. We congratulate ourselves on short meetings. We attempt to make the things of the church make sense in terms of what the world expects; sometimes in the process putting God in the backseat or pushing God out altogether.

Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Jesus is trying to refocus Peter from a worldly agenda to God's purpose for his life and for the church.

Listen to Jesus asking us the same question - "Do you love me?"

How do we respond?