

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER
John 21:1-19 (Do You Love Me?)

As the disciples' intense spiritual experience begins to fade, they return to the same things they had always done. Seven of the disciples have returned to their previous vocation of fishing. Why are they back to fishing? Perhaps they simply don't know what to do next. Lost and confused, they find comfort in the familiar. Or in all their grief, confusion, and mystery of Jesus' appearances, work will take their minds off the turmoil in their current lives and hearts.

They had been fishing on the Sea of Tiberius and were heading to shore with empty nets. Jesus comes to the shore and hollers at them to let their nets down on the other side of the boat. They follow his instructions. The amazing thing is that the disciples did not know who he was at first but still they went back out. Was it their desperation for a good catch, a love of task, a desire for success, a sense of the specialness of the man calling them to return to their task, or something else? Whatever it was, they ventured back out and found great success. Their nets were overflowing. They caught 153 fish. Why that number? Some have suggested that it may simply imply all of the community of believers. Others thought this was the number of nations known at the time.

The nets that had been empty when used under the disciples' own power, with a word from the risen Christ, are filled almost to bursting. Jesus then prepares them a meal. This "last breakfast" once again transforms a moment of deprivation and insufficiency into a feast. And once they hauled their catch ashore, Jesus invites them to bring some of what they have caught to add to what he has already provided for them. They have breakfast with the man they now recognize as Jesus. It is a Eucharistic event despite the lack of wine.

John's final story is presented as another resurrection appearance. But, it is also a commissioning story, or maybe more accurately, it is a story of re-commissioning. And it is at this meal that they receive their re-commissioning from Jesus. They are reminded who they are and what they were originally called to be. They are challenged to get back in the boat and try again, in more ways than one.

There is something powerful here, as Jesus not only provides for the disciples, in what is as close to Eucharistic sharing as is found in John's account, but also invites them to contribute what they have and, by extension, who they are. As they join what they have to what Jesus provides, they are drawn back into the fellowship of those who not only see but also believe.

The scene with Peter and Jesus is even more explicit and powerful as they engage in a conversation of great importance. Earlier, Peter denied Jesus three times. And in this exchange, Jesus reinstates Peter into the fold by asking him three times to confess his love for Jesus and to take care of his sheep. Three times Peter does, though by the third time he is disheartened, even hurt. But what Peter doesn't quite catch in this moment, the listeners do. The last time Peter was gathered around a charcoal fire was when he was in the high priest's court yard and denied Jesus three times. So three times Jesus invites Peter to confess, symbolically wiping away the three times Peter denied him.

And, then Jesus invites Peter's participation by telling him to "feed my sheep." Peter isn't merely forgiven: he is also drawn back into the discipleship community and given meaningful work to do. This kind of love involves an inherent expectation of "doing." This is love as courage, love as risk, love as not wavering, regardless of what we are called to do. Christ calls Peter and us, as individuals and as communities of faith, to follow him even where we would not otherwise go, even where we might not want to go.

The times in which we live are not times for: "we have never done it that way before;" not times for "returning to what we are used to." These times, more than ever, are times that call for the best love of God, friends, neighbours, and enemies that we can muster, or better yet, these times cry out for the love to which God calls us and that God will bring to life within us for the sake of others.

The church without Jesus physically present, needed Peter as the rock Jesus intended him to be. The call to "feed my sheep," to love and lead Jesus' followers, is an important moment for the next step in the developing church.

Again there is an important connection between this scene and our life of faith. We are commissioned at Baptism to share in God's work and ministry. And yet, we often fall short, failing to give witness in word or deed to our faith in the living God. And yet, Jesus doesn't just commission us, Jesus forgives us when we fall short. And Jesus not only forgives us, but calls us to try again. And Jesus not only calls us to try again, he invites us to share what we have and gives us meaningful work to do.

All our lives are potential arenas to add what we have to the bounty Jesus has provided, in order that, together and with Peter, we may feed his sheep. Most of us have a hard time connecting what we do most of the week, to our Sunday faith. As parents, friends, employees, volunteers, citizens or neighbours, we are called to look for opportunities to care for the people and world God loves so much.

We may at times fall short of our goals and aspirations. We will at times have to compromise. We will not always follow through, and time and again we will disappoint and even fall away. That is why we need John's story of re-commissioning to show us that Jesus does not give up on us. Ever! Rather, after each failure he invites us to try again, providing encouragement and nourishment, and then calls us to add what we have, and then go and carry out meaningful work in our communities and in the world.

We come from a tradition founded upon the proposition that there is nothing we can do to secure God's good grace for ourselves, nothing we can undertake or accomplish to establish our merit before God. But is it possible that we have developed such an allergic reaction to "justification by works" that we dismiss the idea of God's expecting us to do *anything*? Is being justified by grace through faith really an excuse to do nothing; to be unchanged, unaffected by the gospel; to live as if Christ's life, death, and resurrection makes no difference?

Certainly Martin Luther could not have imagined such a conclusion. Luther's sermons, much to

the dismay of many Lutherans, are riddled with injunctions and imperatives. None of them are offered with the hope of securing God's grace. Luther's instructions were not about the content of our salvation, something only God can provide, but rather about the character of our Christian life in this world.

From John's gospel, we can conclude the same was true of Jesus. Three times he asks Peter for a confession of faith, even though that repetition hurts Peter's feelings. And three times he responds to Peter's confession by giving him something to do: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

As we read John's gospel, we suspect that Peter will eventually recognize that Jesus' repetition isn't meant to rebuke but as absolution: three invitations to confess in order to wipe away three denials just days earlier. In and through this tri-fold pattern of question and confession, Peter is restored, to himself, to his Lord, to the discipleship community. And yet it is more than that. Peter is not merely forgiven and restored but also commissioned. Peter is given work to do that matters. He is offered a role and given a purpose as he is commissioned into servant leadership.

Over the last several years, the "happiness research" has been conducted. The research studied what makes people happy, why some countries seem to be relatively happier than others, and what factors contribute to longer life and a greater sense of fulfillment. While the research covers a lot of ground, much of the data seem to overlap a deceptively simple conclusion: whatever else may be helpful; health, wealth, and what not, two things are absolutely essential to feel happy. 1) a sense of belonging to a community and 2) the belief that what we do matters. Those are the two key predictors of fulfillment and productivity: belonging and purpose.

That is precisely what Jesus offers Peter. He is brought back into the discipleship community and he is given meaningful work to do. These two things, when genuinely offered and received, can never be separated. Or, to borrow the language of the Reformation, justification and vocation are two sides of the same coin. Forgiveness always leads to mission; restoration to purpose; and inclusion to calling. So how do we tend God's sheep, and care for his lambs?

Our Sunday worship is about more than comfort and inspiration. It's about purpose, purpose that invites change and growth. This is what Luther expected. This is what Jesus expects. Here we are invited to belong to a community of faith, that values our participation into relationship with a God who lavishes grace, meaning, and purpose in equal measures.

It's all about commissioning, awakening to the deceptively simple proposition that God has redeemed us for a purpose and beckons us to church that we might be greeted with absolution, grounded in identity, commissioned with purpose, and sent to make a difference in the world that God loves so much. The unmerited and unexpected promise of grace, mercy, and salvation invite and free us to lead lives of meaning and purpose.

Do you love me? Do you Love me? Do you LOVE me? Then feed my sheep. A pastor shared a story about her grandmother. Her grandmother brought flowers from the altar to the shut-ins. She was around seven years old when her grandmother brought her along one dismal winter

morning. They entered the apartment of an elderly woman bedridden with some illness which incapacitated her. The room had a dusty sheer curtain over one large window, In the middle of the room was a bed and table. The bedside table was littered with unwashed dishes and other litter which the woman was unable, because of her weakness, to remove. A sink was on the other side of the room filled to capacity with dishes. The floor was bare. With no space on the table for the flowers, her grandmother, proceed to clear the table, found a container, placed the altar flowers on the table and then went to the sink and washed the dishes.

The pastor looked around the room, probably observing in stunned silence as she watched her tiny grandmother roll up her sleeves and to go work. After she finished she came back to the bed, sat there and held the woman's hand, an enduring model for ministry. Bring flowers, wash the dishes, and hold a dying woman's hand. While you're at it, fix a meal.

Margaret Mead, the renowned anthropologist, observed Christians behaving badly in New Guinea. The various denominations came onto the island and began competing with each other for the souls of the people. The natives of the Island observed that there was nothing attractive about the Jesus the churches claimed to follow.

When Roman Catholic nuns arrived, they established a hospital and a school to teach the people. It seems that the Sisters had the right idea. That is what made their Jesus so attractive. The people could see and meet the real Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels, through the love they see and experience through the nuns' work. They see the Jesus who keeps asking all of us over and over, Do you love me?

We have here the elements needed to make us truly happy people. We have a community. We all have a meaningful purpose. Do you Love me? Do you REALLY love me? Then feed my sheep – all those lambs that are so very precious to me! Amen.