

## **“AFTER BREAKFAST”**

John 21:15-25

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*Introduction to the scripture:* This morning’s reading is a continuation of last week’s story from John, chapter 21. The disciples have been up all night fishing without catching anything when Jesus appears on the beach and tells them to cast their nets out to a certain place. After taking in 153 fish and returning to shore, Jesus feeds them breakfast. Janet described this part of the story as a “moment of grace.” She told us that the message held “a personal tone: Come and eat. Let me feed you. You are loved. There’s a place for you. Rest here.” We pick up the story when breakfast is over, and the mood shifts dramatically.

*Read John 21:15-25*

There are days when I much prefer breakfast to the conversation that follows. I could not continue on this journey of faith without those “moments of grace,” when the seemingly fruitless effort of ministry miraculously turns into a net full of fish, when I am just enjoying the blessing of Christian fellowship, being fed by Jesus, resting. But there are other days when I am ready to have that serious conversation after breakfast. Am I really serious about this faith journey, about the hard work of ministry? Do I love Jesus enough that I am willing to bear the consequences from the “Jesus-deniers?”

The scene has been set. The charcoal fire upon which Jesus has prepared the breakfast must surely remind Peter of the time not so long ago when he denied knowing Jesus three times. He must be wondering what Jesus knows about his failure, what Jesus thinks about his betrayal. Jesus knows that this is going to be a problem for Peter, and so he jumps right into it after breakfast, after the feeding, the nurturing, the loving, the rest. Peter knows that Jesus loves him, but now Jesus wants to know if the love runs in the other direction. “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” Three times, he asks Peter, “Do you love me?” for the three times that Peter denied him.

Why does he do it? Why does he press Peter so hard? Jesus is the one who forgave Roman soldiers from the cross. He defended a woman caught in adultery from the crowd. He ate with sinners. He gave sight to the blind. He violated social norms to speak with a Samaritan woman. On the surface he seems almost cruel to Peter. Why not just overlook it? Or if he had to mention it, why not just reassure him?

If it had been me, I’d want Jesus to be gentler. But breakfast is over. The time for feeding and rest is over. The time for preparing to work is at hand, and so Jesus needs to address Peter’s failure so that Peter is equipped to answer the call, so that the guilt or distress from his past doesn’t get in the way of the difficult task ahead. Grace hasn’t left the scene, but it’s a different kind of grace. Now it’s the grace that gives him courage and strength to do what must be done. It’s not the grace we receive from Jesus, but the grace we give back as his followers, the grace that extends Jesus’ grace to others.

Jesus healed, forgave, defended, encouraged, fed, and loved people, but he also challenged, judged, and called his followers to difficult tasks. Take up your cross and follow me. Love your enemies. Sell all that you have and give it to the poor.

Jesus is leaving and now he needs Peter to do something for him. "Feed my sheep." When I first became intentional about following Jesus, this was a favorite exchange: "Do you love me? ... Feed my sheep." I heard it as a threefold absolution of Peter's denial. I heard it personally as an affirmation of the connection between loving Jesus and serving the church.

But what was a beautiful text for me, was not for Peter. The gospel writer tells us that Peter was distressed when Jesus asked him a third time. He was stung by Jesus words and stung again when Peter asks about another disciple. "What about him?" Jesus has to redirect him again. "... what is that to you? Follow me!"

So why does he do it? If not for absolution, why revisit Peter's failure? John tells us why in an aside. Jesus "said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God." If Peter had not denied Jesus after the arrest, he would have joined Jesus on a cross. It's what he claimed he would do at supper, that he would stand by Jesus even to death. He failed to keep that promise once, but keep it he would. He would follow Jesus. He would feed his sheep. And for that he would be put to death.

I don't care much for the way Peter is treated here, but that isn't the most startling thing in the passage. Feeding sheep is dangerous work. I've never thought about it this way, but it's true. Feeding sheep is dangerous work.

Martin Luther King died for feeding sheep who hungered for justice. Dorothy Day was criticized for feeding and housing the undeserving. Countless people working in the helping professions sacrifice time and money to house the homeless, feed the poor, teach children, and advocate for the marginalized.

After breakfast, there is work to do, a call to answer. Out of our love for Jesus, will we feed his sheep? We could see this as a call to nurture the church, but a brief look at the gospels suggest that we take a broader view of this. In a well-known parable of Jesus, God rewards those who feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, visit the sick and those in prison. Jesus tells his disciples that when they do this, they are doing it to him. He calls them the least of these. Jesus claims a poor widow as a generous giver, a gentile as having much faith. The outsider, the outcast, the poor, lame, and blind are ministered to by Jesus. He came for those who are sick. These are Jesus' sheep. Those who fail to see these sheep, fail to see Jesus, fail to love Jesus.

Jesus didn't ask the blind man whether he was deserving. He asked what he wanted. He didn't comment on the character of the woman who anointed his feet, but on the generosity of her act. He didn't send the hungry crowd away to scavenge for food. He told

the disciples to feed them. His sheep were not the religious, the wealthy, or the powerful. He fed those with a need. And for that he was killed. Feeding sheep is dangerous work.

But it is the only kind of work worth doing. Feeding sheep is where resurrection happens, where the blind see and the deaf here. It is challenging work, but we don't do it on an empty stomach. At breakfast, we are fed by Jesus, and loved by Jesus.

After breakfast, we are called by Jesus to feed his sheep. Where will we find the strength for this dangerous work? The same place Peter found it: in his love for Jesus. There are those grace-filled moments where we discover Jesus' love for us, and there are grace-filled moments where we discover the strength of our love for Jesus.

We walk because they walk. This is the idea that gave rise to the first Crop Walk. In raising funds for hunger relief, we identify with those who walk, with the least of these. Maybe you can't walk, but there are other things you can do, other ways to feed sheep: a letter to your senator or congress person advocating for hunger relief, protesting on a street corner advocating for justice, or being the shoulder for someone to cry on. Wherever there is need, there you will find Jesus' sheep. Feeding them doesn't necessarily lead to death, but there is often sacrifice to be made, a cross to bear. The love of Jesus and our love for Jesus gives us the grace we need to answer the call. Amen.