

“FEED MY SHEEP”

John 21:1-25

Key Verse: 21:17b

“He said, ‘Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my sheep.’”

In this passage, which is the end of John’s gospel—sometimes called the epilogue—the Risen Jesus appears to his disciples for the third time. The Risen Jesus pays special attention to Peter and restores his love relationship with Peter. He also restores Peter’s mission as a shepherd by saying, “Feed my sheep.” Let’s accept the unchanging love of the Risen Jesus, and make a new decision to feed his sheep.

First, in the Risen Jesus, failure means a new beginning (1-14).

Verses 1-3 say, “Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ‘I’m going out to fish,’ Simon Peter told them, and they said, ‘We’ll go with you.’ So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.” This is the third appearance of the Risen Christ to his disciples (14). The first two had been in Jerusalem. Now they are by the Sea of Tiberias. This had been called the Sea of Galilee during Jesus’ time. There, Jesus had walked and taught and performed great miracles. It was the hometown area of many of the disciples. They were no longer hiding behind locked doors. Most likely, they had gone to Galilee because Jesus told them to go there and wait for him (Mt 26:32, 28:7,10,16; Mk 14:28, 16:7).

The disciples were waiting for Jesus to come and give them direction. What did they do during this waiting time? Peter decided to go out and fish. He was diligent, not lazy. As time permitted, he worked hard at his job of fishing. To do so, he had to overcome himself. Inwardly, Peter was struggling. He had failed Jesus when he denied him three times. He was deeply disappointed with himself. Moreover, his dream of ruling Israel with Jesus was now broken to pieces. Although the Risen Jesus had seen Peter twice, he did not show any special concern for him. Peter felt uncertain about his relationship with Jesus. Did Jesus still trust him? He did not deserve to be trusted. Would Jesus punish him? He deserved that. But the Risen Jesus had been so gracious. Perhaps Jesus would restore him. Peter must have fluctuated between doubt and hope. Yet in the midst of emotional turmoil, Peter did what he should do as a man and went out to fish. He did not allow his emotions to curtail his hardworking spirit. The other disciples were willing to follow him, despite his failure. Probably none of them could come up with a better idea. So they all got into the boat together. However, that night they caught nothing. It seemed that they labored in vain. They were discouraged and hungry, and they felt a sense of failure.

We can understand the disciples' sense of failure. Human beings must be successful in daily life. We must get A's on our exams and "excellent" in our job evaluations. If we fail in school study or at our jobs, we fall into serious fatalism. This makes us vulnerable to the devil. However at this very time, the Risen Jesus came to his disciples.

Look at verses 4-5. "Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, 'Friends, haven't

you any fish?’ ‘No,’ they answered.” The Risen Jesus did not call his disciples failures. He called them his friends. He saw them in light of God’s great purpose for them to be the shepherds for peoples of all nations to fulfill God’s world salvation plan (Jn 15:15). However, in their sense of failure, they did not recognize him. The Risen Jesus deeply understood them. The Risen Jesus began to restore them with tender compassion.

Look at verse 6. “He said, ‘Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.’ When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.” Jesus’ words seemed to be a minor correction to their fishing strategy. But in fact, they were the words of the Son of God, the ruler of all things including the fish of the sea. When the disciples obeyed, they caught a large number of fish. It was a miracle. Through it, Jesus spoke to Peter personally. It reminded Peter of another meeting with Jesus at the Sea of Galilee. That time, through a miraculous catch of fish, Jesus revealed his divine nature to Peter (Lk 5). Peter was an ordinary fisherman. But through Jesus’ miracle, Peter could see God in Jesus. It was the beginning of a life-changing spiritual relationship. Now, when Peter was struggling, Jesus came to him again to help him make a new start. There is no failure in Jesus. To Jesus, failure means a new beginning.

One man was growing through one-to-one Bible study. He thought he could do great things by faith. But he failed to do so. He found in himself a spiritual problem that he did not know about before. Now he feels a sense of failure. But in the Risen Jesus, it is time to make a new beginning. One young woman began to grow spiritually. But when she didn’t pray the Lord’s prayer sincerely, the crafty devil enticed her into sin. She feels like a failure. But to the Risen Jesus, it is the

time to make a new beginning in his grace. In Jesus, failure means a new beginning.

Through the miraculous catch of fish John recognized the Risen Jesus. Then he said to Peter, “It is the Lord.” As soon as Peter heard this, he put his outer garment around him, jumped into the water and went to Jesus. Despite his weakness and failure, Peter had a right attitude toward Jesus. He recognized Jesus as the Son of God. He could not stand before Jesus in a t-shirt and shorts. So he put on his outer garment before jumping into the water as a sign of respect. At the same time, Peter revealed his eagerness to come to Jesus and to restore his relationship with Jesus. Here we can see the greatness of Peter. He did not dwell in his sense of failure. When the Risen Jesus appeared, he went to Jesus eagerly with all the strength of heart he could muster.

The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish. They were amazed by the miraculous catch. Their eyes were opened to recognize the Risen Jesus. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. The Risen Jesus had already prepared a delicious breakfast for them. It was just what the hungry and tired disciples needed. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” The Risen Jesus treated them like great fishermen, acknowledging that they had caught many fish. He wanted to completely restore their sense of victory. The disciples began to feel good.

Then Jesus said, “Come and have breakfast.” Most likely, Jesus cut their bread into slices, toasted and buttered it. Jesus also deboned the fish. Then he put generous portions on each disciples’ plate and passed them out one by one. All the disciples had to do was take and eat deliciously. The Risen Jesus was like a mother feeding

hungry and weary children. His tender actions and embracing heart, combined with the tasty fish and bread, convinced them of his love. There is an expression, “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” The disciples could literally taste Jesus’ love. They could feel Jesus’ love. They realized from their deep hearts that Jesus’ love for them had not changed. Jesus was still the same. He loved them unconditionally from the beginning to the end. Moreover, they accepted his resurrection as a practical reality. The Risen Jesus was with them not only on Sunday, but also on a workday by the seashore. The Risen Jesus came to be with his people and to change failure into success, curse into blessing. In Risen Jesus there is no failure. In Risen Jesus there is no death. There is only eternal victory for those who know the Risen Jesus.

Second, “Do you love me? Feed my sheep” (15-25).

The experience with the Risen Jesus at the Sea of Tiberias was a marvelous moment for the disciples. Their minds flooded with memories of life together with Jesus and all his grace to them. They remembered him feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fish, and the Last Supper, when he fed them and washed their feet. Hymns of praise to Jesus began to rise in their hearts. By the time the meal was over, they were really thankful and happy. Then Jesus directed his attention to Simon Peter. Jesus asked, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?” Jesus’ question was like a knife cutting through the atmosphere. It pierced Peter’s heart and all the disciples must have sat up straight, sensing that serious words were coming.

Let’s read verses 15-17. “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he

said, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.' The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.'" In these verses, we learn several things.

In the first place, Jesus wants his disciples to love him unconditionally. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you truly love me more than these?" The words "truly love" are translated from the Greek word "agape." It means to love with God's love that is unconditional and unchanging. The words "more than these" teach us that we must love Jesus in the first place and we must love Jesus most. Peter had seemed to love Jesus. For Jesus' sake, he was willing to leave his family for extended periods of time. He was willing to leave his career. He had left the miraculous catch of fish in an instant. But Peter could not love Jesus more than his own life. When he had to do this, he failed miserably. Nevertheless, Jesus wanted him to grow until he could love Jesus more than anything, even his own life. How is this possible? It is possible when we realize the love of Jesus. Jesus loved us so much that he laid down his life for us. When we really accept this, our love for Jesus can grow. When we continue to grow, we can love Jesus "more than these."

In the second place, Jesus wants his disciples to grow from the sheep level to the shepherd level. Until now, Peter had been like a sheep to Jesus. Though Peter seemed to sacrifice many things to follow Jesus around, in truth, Peter was deeply satisfied with Jesus' love and recognition. At the same time, Peter had done very little to serve others. Now, Jesus was about to leave them. There were many young and weak believers. They needed a shepherd. They needed someone to love them

and care for them until they could grow strong in Jesus. Jesus wanted Peter to do this. Instead of being loved, he had to love. Instead of being served, he had to serve. In brief, Peter had to grow as a good shepherd like Jesus, who laid down his life for the sheep.

What does it mean to “feed my sheep”? It means to provide food for God’s children so they can grow strong and healthy. This includes both physical and spiritual food. Jesus fed his disciples when they were hungry, caring for their immediate needs. Jesus’ disciples must do the same for others. More than that, Jesus fed his disciples spiritually. He had opened their eyes to the spiritual world by revealing the hidden power of sin, the devil’s mischief, the work of the Holy Spirit, the power of God’s word, and the importance of prayer. They were being changed from physical men into spiritual men. Now it was time for them to help others receive new birth and to grow spiritually by sharing the word of God with them. To be successful, they needed to learn patience. After all, Jesus had been very patient with them. Perhaps it is most difficult to be patient with others when they fail. But Jesus had borne with Peter in his failure, and Peter should learn to bear with others. He must bear with them until they grew from sheep into great shepherds.

In the third place, Peter had grown spiritually through the trial. In answering Jesus, Peter said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Peter realized that Jesus knew all things, including the exact contents of his inner man. Peter has changed. Peter has grown in reverence for Jesus’ word. At the Last Supper, Jesus had told Peter, “Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.” Peter should have accepted Jesus’ words. But Peter insisted, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Peter thought he knew

better. So he contradicted Jesus' words. It was a mistake. Peter still loved himself too much to sacrifice his life for Jesus. Peter should have accepted Jesus' words, admitted his shortcoming, and prayed for God's help. When he ignored Jesus' word and followed in his own strength, he failed miserably. Now Peter realized that Jesus' words were more trustworthy than his own thoughts, even about himself. When he said, "You know all things," he meant, "You know me better than I know myself." This realization was the basis for the real restoration of Peter.

In the fourth place, there is deep meaning in Jesus asking Peter the same thing three times. There is a digression in Jesus' questions to Peter from "do you truly love me more than these?" to "do you truly love me?" to "do you love me." Actually, in the original Greek, Jesus digresses from "agape" love in verses 15 and 16, to "phileo" love in verse 17. This digression, combined with the three-time repetition of the question, was meant to have a profound effect on Peter. Jesus expressed plainly that he had no confidence in Peter's human love and loyalty to him. This hurt Peter. Peter had wanted to be faithful to Jesus with his human love and loyalty, but he had failed completely. To admit this failure before Jesus was painful. But in doing this, Jesus helped Peter to die to his passion and pride. It was a step in building a new foundation for a love relationship based on Jesus' grace and truth alone.

In addition, Jesus cut through the level of mind and heart to get to the soul of Peter. Love is more than a feeling. Love is more than thought. Love involves decisions of the will that lead to action. Jesus wanted Peter to go beyond the level of feelings to begin to practice the love of Jesus in action. Jesus wanted Peter to heal the hurts of his sheep, feed them when they were hungry, solve their marriage problems,

restore them from failure, and so on. When Peter did these practical things for his sheep, Jesus would regard it as love for him.

Look at verse 18. “I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” These words are precisely Jesus’ prophecy about Peter’s future. Jesus indicated the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God (19). Then Jesus said to Peter, “Follow me.” Jesus believed Peter would be a shepherd for God’s sheep as Jesus was. To serve God’s sheep, Peter would learn to overcome himself and live sacrificially. When Peter was younger he was a carefree teenager. He went to the baseball field and played ball, then he went swimming, then he went to the Dairy Queen for ice cream. He wore the kinds of clothes he liked, tattered blue jeans, flannel shirts, and Nike gym shoes. As he grew spiritually, he would learn to subdue his human freedom to obey God and serve others. To start with, he would wear a suit and tie. Finally he would undergo martyrdom for the glory of God. Jesus was sure that Peter would be a great shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Peter could also be sure of this, because Jesus said so. Jesus’ words gave Peter a new foundation for life as a shepherd. Jesus restored in Peter a clear life direction and life-giving spirit.

Peter was willing to live a sacrificial life. But when he turned around and saw John following them, eavesdropping on their conversation, he was distracted and began to think about John. Peter seems to have thought that John should share his fate as a martyr and that Jesus should tell him about it too. So he asked Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.” Jesus taught Peter to mind his own business.

Jesus had a clear purpose and direction for each of the disciples and they were all different. It was not Peter's business to figure out Jesus' will and purpose for the other disciples. It was Peter's business to follow Jesus according to the revealed will of God for him. Here we learn that each of us must carry our own cross and we must respect our fellow disciples as Jesus' chosen servants. To some it is given to die as martyrs. To some it is given to serve many years and die in peace. Each of us must obey God's will personally.

Look at verse 25. "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written." When we want to write mission reports, newsletters, testimonies, or messages, the material about Jesus is endless. We cannot say everything. But there is a point. The point is that Jesus is God and by believing in him we have eternal life and the kingdom of God as our inheritance.

Throughout John's gospel study for the last 13 months, we have heard Jesus' words that convince that Jesus loves us and that he gave his life as the Lamb of God for our sins. Whoever believes in Jesus will not perish, but have eternal life. Now the Risen Jesus asks, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." Let's love Jesus by feeding his sheep.