



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 3 Year C

Lambs and Sheep

[RCL]: Acts 9:1-6, (7-20); Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Today, it's all about lambs and sheep.

Don't we like driving by a farm or ranch and seeing the cute, docile creatures in a field? Sometimes, wouldn't we like to stop and feed them like Jesus told Peter to do? Don't we just love cozying up to little lambs in the petting zoo? And don't we remember fondly singing, "Mary had a little lamb," a pet that followed wherever she would go?

Of course, real shepherds appear to find the feeding and tending a bit less romantic. Shepherding as an occupation had existed for 3,000 years before Jesus chose to use as a metaphor – as an example - what shepherds have done for centuries. His hearers would have recognized easily the details of tending and feeding sheep, and those first-century Middle-Easterners who met and listened to Jesus would have known intimately the detailed behavior of sheep the shepherds fed and tended.

There were in the flocks all kinds of sheep - small and weak, big and aggressive, timid and helpless, sweet and precious and obnoxious and disgusting, terrified of predators and senseless followers of the animal in front, sick and healthy, black and white, rams and ewes - all kinds of sheep - just like people.

All kinds. Just like the people Jesus intended for Peter to feed and tend. Jesus said to him, "If you love me, then feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep." Here, Jesus gives Peter – and he gives us – a practical example of what it means to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This example of feeding sheep also prevents us from succumbing to the culture's superficial understanding of love that invades our lives so often and in so many ways, an understanding of love that has lost its power. Reaching the highest level of Christian feeding of God's sheep is, rather, very difficult. It requires that we do so with love of the deepest Christian kind of love. Maybe that's why some people like to refer to Christian love as compassion. We might understand compassion better than what we often see as examples of love at the movies or on television. And, of course, the Greek word for the love that Jesus asked Peter about – is *agape* (ah-GAH-pay). It is the self-giving, sacrificial, getting nothing in return, giving

without strings or condition – the Good Samaritan - kind of love. It also might help to remember that this kind of love is often translated in the King James Bible as “Charity.”

We can learn about this kind of love in terms of sheep feeding and tending, can't we? Think about this church. Over the years and today - what are the forms of outreach practiced here? What are the ministries beyond the congregation that help those who need it the most, who need to be fed and tended to? And bring to mind the ministries *within* the congregation where people tend and feed one another. And then consider what more the congregation might do in the future by listening carefully to Jesus saying, “If you love me, feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

Now, pause a moment and think about the sheep – the people – you would just as soon *not* tend to or feed – those in this community or in the wider world. Who are they? Why is it hard to consider dealing with them and caring for them with *agape* love?

Jesus came for all of us, to unlock the spark of God within us, and release it in the form of the love he intends not just for the sheep we want to feed and tend, but all sheep, all people.

Shepherds of today could tell us what shepherds of Jesus' day knew about feeding sheep - the scientifically named *ovis aries*. Sheep can kick you and rough-and-tumble rams will headbutt you. Orphans might require bottle feeding. Sheep are vulnerable to predators and susceptible to parasites. Sometimes they will fight over food. Separated from the flock, they tend to become stressed and panic. Shearing is labor-intensive and exhausting. And sheep need fresh water – even in conditions of drought in summer and freezes in winter. You get the picture – and – oh, yes, all the while you are feeding and tending to them, you find yourself stepping into what they naturally leave behind. A feedlot is no place for the faint-hearted.

Jesus didn't use this metaphor lightly. He knew that if Peter's and our love could lead to feeding and tending “people-sheep,” it would involve very hard work – a demanding commitment that requires sacrifice for the sake of others.

Because this congregation is a part of the body of Christ, it can more easily continue and expand the ministries of loving outreach beyond the congregation and the loving care within the circle of faith. You can do this better because of your mutual support of and courageous challenge to one another.

Of course, Jesus also calls us as individuals to feed and tend his sheep. Maybe these examples will stimulate your thinking about how in your life you can love Jesus by feeding and tending his sheep:

- Wife to husband: “Do you love me?” Husband to wife: “Sweetheart, you know I do.” Wife: “Then go next door and fix the neighbor's roof. It leaks.”
- Big brother to little sister at recess: “Do you love me?” Sister: “Of course I do.” Brother: “Then go over to the new kid that no one likes and play with her.”

- Children to parents: “Do you love us?” Parents: “Yes. You are the love of our lives.” Children: “Then cancel whatever you have planned for Sunday afternoon and cook a bunch of lasagna for the soup kitchen downtown.”
- God to the President and Congress: “Do you love me?” President and Congress: “Of course. Don’t, we say, ‘In God we trust’ all the time?” God: “Then learn to work together and figure out an immigration plan that is fair to everyone.”

If we take seriously today’s Gospel and try to follow where Peter led after hearing Jesus, it all might seem like a challenge beyond our limits. But today we have heard Jesus’ call to us as his Church and as his individual followers to offer compassion, *agape* love, to a hurting and sinful world. And today we have the choice to continue following that call.

Jesus to us: “If you love me then Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

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