

John 21:15-19

“Feed, Shepherd, Feed”

“15 So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He says to him, ‘Indeed, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He says to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ 16 He says to him again a second time, ‘Simon, Son of John, do you love me?’ He says to him, ‘Indeed, Lord, you know that I love you.’ He says to him, ‘Shepherd my sheep.’ 17 He says to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved when He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ And he says to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things. You know that I love you.’ [Jesus] says to him, ‘Feed my lambs. 18 Truly, truly I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and you walked about where you wished; but whenever you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.’ 19 This He said signifying by what death he would glorify God. And upon saying this He said to him, ‘Follow Me’” (John 21:15-19).

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

1. The highly stylized conversation between Jesus and Peter in this passage, which occurred sometime after our Lord’s Resurrection from the dead, does at least three things. First, in Jesus’ three-fold question to Peter “Do you love Me?,” and Peter’s three-fold response, “You know that I love you,” the three-fold exchange undoes the damage that happened when Peter denied Jesus three times at the charcoal fire in the courtyard of the high priest that he even knew Jesus. Second, Jesus restores Peter to service—and, indeed, to that special prominence Peter enjoyed among the disciples prior to the death and resurrection of Jesus. And third, at the end of the passage Jesus in fact predicts Peter’s death in the Roman circus, perhaps 35 years hence: “Truly, truly I tell you, when you were young you girded yourself and walked about where you wished; but whenever you are old you will stretch out your hands and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.”
2. I have entitled this morning’s message “Feed, Shepherd, Feed,” for this is Jesus’s charge to Peter putting him back into service after Peter’s denial—namely, “Feed my lambs” (verse 15), “Shepherd my sheep” (verse 16), and “Feed my sheep” (verse 17). Obviously Jesus directs the charge not only to Peter himself—but much rather to all pastors (that is, to shepherds, for that is what “pastor” means) and for those who aspire to the office of the ministry, of which there are many of you in attendance today.

3. So the first charge—to Peter himself, and to all actual (or even would-be) occupants of the pastoral office—is “Feed my lambs” (or βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου in the Greek). First the verb for “feed” is the Greek βόσκω, which in Lat. is *pasco* –*ere* = “to feed,” or “to forage”—as in the feeding/foraging of animals. Near where I grew up there was a small town called Pasco, WA—so called because in the old days shepherds used to feed/forage animals in that locale. This is the only place where the verb βόσκω occurs in John’s gospel, but in the synoptics it is used of that herd of many swine feeding on the hillside into which Jesus cast the demons who were oppressing the Gadarene demoniac (Mt 8), and in Lk 15 in the parable of the lost son who was sent by the citizen into his fields to feed (that is, to “slop”) the pigs (Lk 15:15).
4. Peter is charged by Jesus, “Feed my lambs.” Again, the word “lambs” occurs only here. It is a diminutive, so the sense is, “feed my [little] lambs.” The spiritual feeding and nourishment of children is made the first part of Peter’s apostolic office—the work of the pastor, if you will. And it doesn’t take much to see in the gospels Jesus’ great care and concern for his “little lambs”—that is, the children. In Mt 18 when they asked Jesus who was the greatest he placed a child into their midst and said, “whoever does not turn and become like children shall not enter into the Kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3). Likewise, those who cause “these little ones who believe in Me” to sin are liable to horrendous punishment: “it is better that a great millstone be tied around his neck and thrown into the depth of the sea.” And in the parable of the lost sheep the shepherd leaves the 99 and goes after the one lost lamb.
5. These are all figurative ways of describing the pastor’s ministry to the young children; he is not just to care for adults, but to care for the young children, to help young families so they can bring the babes and infants to the Divine Service and family devotions, where the Lord Jesus Christ is present with His people. Also, in good time, the pastor (in the footsteps of the restored Peter) is to teach the lambs (that is, the children) the Commandments, Creeds, and Lord’s Prayer of the Catechism, which results in bringing the young catechumens to the Lord’s Supper—feeding them the Body and Blood of Christ. The world pays scant attention to this activity of pastors’ ministry for

children and young people, but Jesus commends it highly—and so places Peter (and those who occupy Peter’s office) into service: “Feed my lambs!”

6. The second charge is, “Shepherd my sheep.” This is the third week in Easter which, in many churches, is called *Misericordias Domini* = “the mercies of the Lord.” If you were in church on Sunday you may have noticed how much of the service was given to Ps. 23: “The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me besides the still waters; He restoreth my soul,” etc.
7. I had not noticed until now, preparing to preach for today’s service, how much the imagery of Ps. 23 depends upon the pastoral office: “Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me,” the psalmist says in verse 4—symbols, of course of the holy ministry. The green pastures, the still waters, the restoration of souls—all this work of the Lord happens through the office of the holy ministry. The rod and the staff keep the wolf at bay—that is, they warn the susceptible sheep away from destructive heresy. Yet something else is the so-called “table” that the Lord spreads in the sight of my enemies (verse 5). We’re not far wrong if we think there of the “table” of the Lord’s Supper which sustains the flock—nourishes the sheep—right in the face of the devils and heretics and enemies who despise the holy things of God, yet we feast thereon. “My cup runneth over”—that is, one cannot out-consume the Lord’s abundance. So “shepherd my sheep,” the second charge.
8. Then the third charge, in John 21:17: “Feed my sheep.” So it’s back to “feeding” again. Again, the Greek words used convey the feeding of animals—green pasture, still waters, hay, provender—nothing all that spectacular by worldly standards. You may recall those scenes from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy about 15 years ago, how Frodo and Sam were supplied on their long journey to Mt. Doom in Mordor by that special bread called the Lembas, which sustained their journey. So when Jesus charges Peter to “feed his sheep” he is encouraging him to fill his charges’ stomachs with the good fare of Word and Sacrament—that which doesn’t seem that special in the eyes of the world, but which sustains the people of God.

9. It goes without saying that first St. Peter, then those who follow Peter as junior pastors and theologians, always need to be learning and growing in God's Word. Of Peter and John it was said in the Temple that they were ἄνθρωποι ἄγραμματοι καὶ ἰδιῶται = "uneducated and private" men (Acts 4:13). That is why most NT critics to this day don't think that Peter, Jesus's right-hand apostle, really could have written the highly stylized and quite erudite Greek of the Petrine correspondence—1 and 2 Peter.
10. But actually this disconnect could prove the point that he *did* compose them, just as has been traditionally believed—for what if, during the approximately 35 years between Jesus charging of Peter to ministry and his eventual martyrdom in the Roman circus, Peter slowly but steadily learned Greek and all the theological disciples needed to "feed" Christ's holy people? Peter, in other words, "grew" into his position—the same way any young pastor, theologian, and professor must. It requires time and submission to God's Word over the long haul. But the growth comes... daily and steadily.
11. And the sheep come to depend upon the preaching pastor for their sustenance: "My sheep hear My Voice, and I know them, and they follow Me, and I give to them life everlasting, and they shall not perish forever, and no one shall snatch them from out of my hand" (Jn 10:27-28). Where does this happen, and how? Answer: through a faithful and humble parish pastor in it for the long haul. He is not there to "lord it over" the sheep, nor to "fleece" them. But rather to feed—as he himself is fed—over many years of determined service. So, Lord willing, the process begins at seminary as the theological candidate studies, learns, worships, and grows with due diligence in a community of faith and learning such as this one; but then the process continues many years hence as a pastor in Christ's service ripens into old age. This is what the Resurrected Christ had in mind for Peter, forgiven and reinstated into his apostleship after that terrible sin of denying that he even knew Jesus. This, I submit, is what the Lord intends for anyone resolved to serve Christ and his sheep as a pastor of Christ's sheep.

12. So, “Feed, Shepherd, Feed.” That is, “Feed my lambs” (verse 15). “Shepherd my sheep” (verse 16). Then finally, “Feed my sheep” (verse 17). It’s the third week of Easter, right in the middle of *Misericordias Domini* = “the mercies of the Lord.” It’s worth recalling for a moment how many of these mercies-from-the-Lord are distributed to us lambs (or sheep) through a flesh-and-blood pastor to which many of you aspire. In God’s good time and way. Through Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN.

“And now the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” AMEN.