

Easter III C 2010
Texts: Acts 9:1-20
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11-14
John 21: 1-19

“Simon son of John, do you love me? Feed my sheep.” John 21:17

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and me redeemer. Amen.

Does it feel like forever since Lent? It has only been 2 weeks since Easter day (and by the way, we celebrate Easter not for one day, but for fifty) and yet for me at least events of Lent and Holy Week seem a distant memory.

In just a few short weeks we have gone from the Last Supper to the first breakfast in today’s gospel reading.

I love this particular reading for several reasons, not the least of which is that it was the Gospel reading for my graduation Eucharist at Sewanee. In this reading Peter, also known as Simon, son of John is given the summary of all the things Jesus has tried to teach him and the rest of the disciples while Jesus was with them.

This commission given to Peter was directly handed down to me, as I became a priest in God’s Church. Today, I am handing it down to you. We are all commissioned into Christ’s service, every single one of us.

Being commissioned into Christ’s service starts at our baptism and ends at our death. There is never a day we aren’t given the command to love Jesus and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Being a disciple of Jesus can be exciting and scary. It can be amazing and confusing as well as awe-inspiring. It is, in reality, the most natural thing in the world, but we humans, God bless us, make it so much more difficult than it needs to be.

Jesus wants to make sure the disciples understand; he wants to wrap up all of his teaching to them one last time because he knows he will not be with them much longer.

The disciples have gone back to what they have always known. The events of the last week have left them dazed, drained and confused. They do not know what their future holds. Their life altering involvement with Jesus, Jesus who they saw crucified on the cross, dead and buried in a rock-hewn tomb, sends them back to the security of their past.

They may not have understood all that had happened or what was going to happen, but they did know that life does not stop, no matter how much they may have wanted it to. They understood that they and their families would still be hungry, would still need clothes, would still need some sense of security, so they go back to what they knew before knowing Jesus; they go back to fishing.

While they are out on the Sea of Tiberius Jesus appears to them on shore. They do not know it is Jesus at first. It isn't until he tells them to put their nets down again and they become filled with a huge number of fish does the Beloved disciple exclaim, "It is the Lord!" Peter then jumps into the water and tries to swim to Jesus while the others bring in their catch.

Jesus prepares breakfast for them and they share in a holy meal yet one more time. It is after Jesus feeds them that he asks Peter whether Peter loves him. Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus tells Peter that if he really loves him he will care for Jesus' flock as Jesus cared for them. "Feed my lambs," Jesus tells him.

Two additional times Jesus asks Peter whether Peter loves him and two additional times Peter says yes. Jesus' reply to Peter's proclamation of love is the same each time. "Tend my lambs. Feed my sheep." To love the Good Shepherd is to love the sheep.

I said earlier that we try to make this harder than it needs to be. I truly believe that. We put extraneous stumbling blocks in our way, and unfortunately in the way of those we are called to serve.

Jesus did not put the disciples through some testing period to make sure they were smart enough or holy enough to carry Christ's message of love. Jesus didn't tell them to make sure that the people they proclaimed the gospel to were spotless or subscribed to the right orthodoxy. All Jesus said was, "if you love me, you will feed and tend to them."

On Easter I told you that as Christians we did not proclaim resurrection as an interesting theological idea or principal and that we did not proclaim Christ crucified as some paranormal experience. I told you that we proclaimed Jesus Christ born among us, living and true. We proclaim Christ as having died, being raised and ascended to God, yet who walks with us still.

Christianity is nothing more and nothing less than "a love affair with the living Christ."¹ "If you love me, feed my sheep." To love the Good Shepherd is to love the sheep.

Bishop Porter Taylor is the Bishop of the Diocese of Western North Carolina. He tells the story of a little boy in his diocese by the name of Will. Will is the son of a priest in his diocese. The priest told Bishop Taylor that he came home one day to find his 4-year-old son lining up all his friends in a straight line. Very solemnly and devoutly Will would place a pretzel in his friends outstretched hands and say, "the Body of Christ, the bread of heaven."

Things were going fine until Will got to his six year old sister who was having absolutely none of it and who was refusing to hold out her hands. Will jabs her in the chest with a pretzel and says, "Take it. It's salvation!"²

On another occasion, Will was asked by his mother what had happened in church that day, to which Will replied, "Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." Does Will sound like a typical priest's kid or what? What Will is, however, is more like a typical disciple.

¹ Bishop Porter Taylor 5/12/05. Sermon delivered at All Saints Chapel, Sewanee Tennessee.

² ibid

Bishop Taylor writes that these two instances with Will pretty well describe how we go about trying to love Jesus' flock.

In the first we do nothing short of running down, hog tying and try to pour the love of Christ down someone else's throat because it is good for them. At the very least some of us will threaten others if they do not believe like we do or if they chose to refuse Jesus' gift of love.

I am reminded of a story my mother told me about growing up in the orphanage. Every Friday the children were lined up and a spoonful of castor oil was poured down their throat because, "it was supposed to be good for us." It was not unusual for the children to gag or even wretch after this exercise of forced health.

When my mother left the orphanage for good, she didn't know where she would be living or how she was going to eat, but she did know that she would never, ever have to take castor oil again.

When we force the love of Jesus on someone let us remember that rather than taking it in and experiencing the great love of God as just that, the great love of God, we may actually be setting up a situation where a person gags on it and wants nothing more to do with it for the rest of their life.

Bishop Taylor says that the other way we disciples get it wrong is to talk about so much extraneous stuff, "matters of secondary importance" he calls them, that all people hear among us is blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

That is nothing less than tragic. To proclaim the Good News, to proclaim the best news in the entire world is to feed God's sheep, to tend God's lambs. We do that by showing our love for Christ in loving the rest of the world and by acting on that love.

The world is starving. It is starving literally for food and it is starving figuratively for faith. The world is starving to know that life matters, that nothing can strip them of their dignity or of God's love for them.

It is so easy to get wrapped up in arguing fine points of theology that we often fall into the trap of mistaking theology, as important as that is, for faith. It is so much easier to live in our heads than in our hearts. But

Christ says to us time and time and time again, “Do you love me? Feed my sheep. Get out of your heads and into my heart and then feed my sheep, tend my lambs.”

Today we are going to break ground on our long awaited community garden. We will do this with or without outside help. We are commissioned to feed God’s people regardless of what the situation may bring. We will do this so as to remind ourselves that Jesus didn’t just give his disciples words, but also gave them actions.

Jesus invited his disciples to breakfast and then sent them out. We come to this table to be fed and nourished so that we can go out and feed and nourish others. It is that simple. We need not make it more complicated. As Bishop Taylor points out “this really isn’t rocket science.”

No, it really isn’t rocket science; it is far, far more. Being a disciple is really nothing less and nothing more than having a love affair with the living Christ and showing our love by tending and feeding his flock.

Amen.