

FEED MY SHEEP
The Third Sunday of Easter

(04/14/2024)

Scripture Lesson: John 21:1-19
Mark 12:28-34

“Jesus said to him [Simon Peter], ‘Feed my sheep.’” (John 21:17)

“Jesus answered, ‘The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord, our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-34)

This morning, we are going to explore a theme that I raised in our United Parishes of Southborough Easter sunrise service two weeks ago: the question of what it means to be a Christian. At the sunrise service, as those of you who were there will attest, I cleverly wove this question around an in-depth exploration of the Hokey Pokey, exploring how this staple of wedding receptions might challenge us to think about the heart of our faith. Since several of you here this morning were gathered by the side of the lake in Hopkinton for this momentous event, I will forego the temptation to recycle my sermon illustration—at least for another decade or so. However, the question still remains. And I think it is an important one.

The question of what it means to be a Christian is of little interest to many, especially if they are not Christians. For some Christians the answer comes quickly. It may be a matter of a single belief or a series of beliefs. It may be a commitment to living one’s life by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. It may have to do with membership in a certain church or religious denomination. For some of us, however, this is a complex question, a question that leads us into an ever-deepening search.

Several years ago, in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group, we read the book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* by the Protestant theologian Marcus Borg. Borg suggests that there are three ways to answer the question of what it means to be a Christian. The first is based on belief: the belief that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. The second has to do with morality: with the way you live your life. The third is grounded in relationship: your relationship with Jesus and your relationship with God through Jesus. Borg believes, as I do, that while all of these are important, our relationship with God through Jesus is the most important of the three.

This sentiment is congruent with the thesis of another book we read in a past Spiritual Study and Growth group—*The Cloud of Unknowing*. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a spiritual guide written by an unknown fourteenth century English monk. The author tells us that we can

never fully understand God, that God cannot be grasped by reason. The only way we can truly know God, according to the author, is through love. As he puts it,

God may be well loved, but he may not be thought of. He may be reached and held close by means of love, but by means of thought never.

With regard to what this monk calls the “cloud of unknowing,” that which can separate us from God, from our experience of God, from experiencing our relationship with God, he says,

You are to step above it with great courage and with determination, and with a devout and pleasant stirring of love, and you are to try to pierce that darkness which is above you. You are to strike that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love; and you are not to retreat no matter what comes to pass.

It is clear from this medieval spiritual guide that the central dynamic in knowing God is relationship! It is love; it is not belief! Jesus says this very clearly in his teaching about what he calls the first and the greatest commandment. Jesus would assure us that salvation, dwelling in the kingdom of heaven, is not a matter of knowledge, of biblical analysis, or of being conversant with the complexities of systematic theology. I’m sure you agree that this is fortunate—for most of us, including me!

The scripture lessons for this morning, the third Sunday of the Easter season, speak to the importance of love as an answer, or at least a response, to the question of what it means to be a Christian.

Jesus has been crucified. His body has been laid in a tomb provided by one of his disciples, Joseph of Arimathea. On the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. When she arrives, she finds the stone has been rolled away. She runs to tell Peter and John. They run to the tomb, see that, indeed, it is empty, but they do not understand what happened. They return to their homes.

Mary, however, remains by the tomb. Suddenly she becomes aware of two angels, one at the head and one at the foot of the place where Jesus lay. The angels ask her why she is weeping. In the process of answering their question, Mary realizes there is a man standing behind her. Believing him to be the gardener, the caretaker of the cemetery, she asks him if he knows who has taken the body of her Lord and what they have done with it. It is only when Jesus calls her name that she recognizes him.

Jesus tells Mary to tell the disciples, *whom he refers to as his friends, as his brothers*, that he is ascending to the Father. Note that Jesus now refers to his disciples as his friends, as his brothers! These speak of relationship! Mary does as she has been instructed, but the disciples still do not believe her. Their minds cannot yet grasp what has happened.

Later that day, as the disciples are gathered behind locked doors, Jesus suddenly appears in their midst and tells them, “Peace be with you.” He shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. Then he breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Because of these powerful experiences, Mary and the disciples realize that their Lord lives not only in their memories, but also in their lives and in the world! They receive his blessing of peace. Then they receive the Holy Spirit that *he breathes onto them or into them*. What a powerful experience! What a deeply meaningful spiritual initiation! This should have been all that was necessary to transform skeptics into believers, to transform disciples into apostles!

The people of Jesus’ time fell into several categories. Most were probably indifferent to Jesus and his teachings (as they are today). The so-called “crowds” were comprised of those who were somewhat curious. Those who are described in the gospels as “followers of Jesus” were those who made a commitment to follow him, to try to live by his teaching. According to scripture, there were several hundred followers.

From this group of followers, Jesus calls twelve disciples to accompany him during the three years of his ministry. They hear his words and witness his healing miracles. In some passages, however, it seems that there are more than twelve disciples, for people like Mary Magdalene, Joseph of Arimathea, and the two unnamed followers who walk with their risen Lord on the road to Emmaus are also described as disciples.

The disciples become apostles after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and specifically after their experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As disciples they are followers of Jesus; they are followers of the spiritual discipline to which Jesus calls us, the spiritual path that Jesus calls the Way. As apostles they are called to spread his teaching about the kingdom of God and continue his ministry of healing in this world of space and time.

Following their post-resurrection experiences of Jesus, their post-resurrection encounters with their risen Lord, the disciples should have become apostles. But they don’t! Instead, Peter says to the other disciples, “I am going fishing.”

Before they became disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fisherman. When Jesus calls them to be his disciples, he tells them, somewhat cryptically, that they will become “fishers of people.” However, following the resurrection, instead of moving forward into a new life, into a new identity, they return to the place where they began. Once again, they are fishers of fish.

The disciples move backward instead of moving forward. Admittedly, it was not easy for them to grasp what they had seen and heard following the resurrection. These experiences were leading them into a new way of looking at life--and also a new way of looking at death. They began to realize that death did not hold sway over Jesus, and it might not hold ultimate power over them! The post-resurrection encounters pull back the curtain of death and opens them to the experience of eternity!

There are several lessons that we can glean from the disciples' experiences following the resurrection. The first is our more than marginal propensity following a loss, a trauma, to move backward in life instead of forward, to move backward in our faith instead of forward. Instead of taking our precious experiences of sacred presence and moving forward into them, we consign them to the cluttered basement of our lives. We live out our days without attending to our relationship with our Lord, and hence without a consciousness of his presence. After the joyous celebration of Easter has come and gone, we settle back into the normal routines of our busy lives.

The second lesson is about the emptiness of this kind of life, a life devoid of faith, relationship, love, and a sense of presence. The disciples return to their old lives, their old ways. But it is not the same! Scripture tells us the disciples fished all night, but they came up empty.

The third lesson speaks to those moments when we feel separated from our Lord, when we are not aware of his presence. Remember that when this whole enterprise started, Peter, Andrew, James, and John were not looking for Jesus. In fact, they were probably not looking for anything. They were not searching for Jesus, but *Jesus was searching for them*. Scripture reminds us that *even when we are not searching for Jesus, Jesus is searching for us!*

The risen Christ not only helps the disciples experience abundance in their daily tasks; he also feeds them. When they arrive at the shore, they find that he has prepared breakfast for them. He feeds them with fish and bread. Of course, he also feeds them with his body and his blood. He feeds them with his teachings. And he offers this spiritual food, the Bread of Life, to us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Like the disciples, we can be spiritually fed and nourished in many ways. We can be fed in our moments of worship. Perhaps we will be touched by a word of scripture. Something we never heard before jumps out at us. As you know, I am often touched by the words of our old-time hymns, the faith statement of the man or woman, usually in the middle 1800's or even earlier, who wrote the text.

We can be fed by our moments of prayer and the experience of presence that is offered to us in communion. We can be fed through our fellowship with each other. We are certainly fed

in many ways at our coffee hour, which often tends toward a coffee two-hour, and at our potluck suppers! We can also be fed through our mission outreach, the offerings we share with people in need throughout the world, and especially the food we share with those in our community who are food insecure through the United Parishes of Southborough Food Pantry. Our souls can be nourished by our encounter with Jesus in our everyday lives.

The final lesson in today's scripture is that Jesus calls us to make a commitment. He calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John to become not only disciples, but also apostles. The experience of the risen Christ, whether it occurs on the beach, in our daily tasks, in church, or on the road, not only gives something to us; *it asks something of us! It always asks something of us!* It calls us to move forward into the world as apostles, as bearers of the Good News in our words, in our actions, in our lives.

I'm sorry, but that's the way it is with Jesus! Every experience of him turns out to be a call to work for him, more correctly to work *with* him. Revelation and call go together. The risen Christ does not say to the disciples on the beach, "I am Jesus, raised from the dead." He does not say, "I am Jesus, raised from the dead; believe in me." He says, "I am Jesus, raised from the dead, *and I have some work for you to do.*"

Jesus begins by asking Peter if he loves him. This is a reminder that our Christian faith, our Christian life is grounded in relationship, that it is grounded in love. Then, *in the context of this relationship*, Jesus tells Peter to feed his sheep. This is so typical of Jesus! To the ones who only a few days earlier had forsaken him, who were nowhere to be found when he was arrested and crucified, he entrusts his most important work! He does the same to us. He calls us to feed his sheep!

We are called to carry out Jesus' healing work in the world. People should encounter Jesus through us. I like the saying: "Live in such a way that those who know you but don't know God, will come to know God because they know you."

Like Peter, we are called to be disciples, followers of the Way. We need to grow in the faith. We need to experience our Lord's healing presence and power—physically, emotionally, and in our relationships. But we are also called to be apostles. It is just possible that when these two calls overlap, when we give our hearts to his obedience, when we both love and serve our Lord, we will find that the restless tumult of our life is calmed. Through his presence we experience inner healing. Then we can bring a healing presence to everyone we encounter.

In some ways Easter has come and gone. In other ways it hasn't. Remember, the original Easter event did not end with the empty tomb. It lived on in the ways that the risen Lord reentered his disciples' lives. It lived on in the ways that they became conscious of the Holy

Spirit both within and among them. It lived on in their transformation from disciples to apostles, in the ways they responded to his call.

Like the disciples, the Easter event can also live on in us. It can live on in the ways that the risen Lord appears in our normal, everyday lives. It can live on in the ways, in the times, in those brief moments when we become conscious of his presence as the Holy Spirit both within and among us. It lives on in our response to his call to become disciples of the Way, to carry out his healing, reconciling work in the world.

Like the disciples, who initially returned to their old ways, when we feel ourselves alone, lost, separated from God and from the comforting, strengthening, healing power of Christ (and we all feel this way at times), remember. At the most basic level, it is all about *relationship*, and the initiative in this relationship begins with God; it begins with Jesus. Even when we don't have the sense to reach out to Jesus; Jesus is reaching out to us. All we have to do is open our eyes, open our hearts, and open our minds. Then we will be able to see what is right before us. Jesus will find us, nourish our souls, and call us forth into life.

Then he will give us some work to do.

Like the disciples, let us be about our Lord's work as resurrection people and a resurrection church!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.