

**Sermon**  
**McCarter Presbyterian Church**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter**  
May 12, 2019

**Old Testament Lesson**

Hosea 11:1-4

**NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon**

John 21:12-19

Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "Follow me."

**Feeding Lambs and Sheep**

When I was younger (much younger) just under half of the nation's population lived in **rural areas**, mostly on farms. In some counties in South Carolina where I lived, that was closer to 80%. I was fortunate to live in house on a lot with a street address in the "city," as my friends from the nearby farming communities of Crescent, Green Pond, and Cross Anchor termed it. Therefore, I was a "city slicker." Of course, I realized that by comparison my lifestyle was pretty different from theirs. I had work to do nearly every day: I had a paper route and chores around the house. But, these friends of mine lived on farms that required daily **morning chores**: feeding chickens, collecting eggs, milking cows, slopping a pig of two, and gathering and spreading hay. These were not activities that I performed back in the "city." So, these friends and acquaintances were literally correct in noting these differences in our circumstances. On the other hand, I knew that I lived in a small town, and that even nearby Greenville hardly qualified as a city in the 1950's.

Nevertheless, my closest friends were kind enough to invite me to their farms. And, in a sense we celebrated their routine activities. We did the chores together in the mornings. We checked on the hens, collected the eggs, and milked the cows. I enjoyed all of that. And, to me the **life in the country** was pretty good. As I grew older, I considered getting some land and starting a working farm. However, I have not acted on that so far.

Now, I bring up all of this experience in the countryside for a purpose. Out of all that I described, I never mentioned one of the more common domestic animals in the world: **sheep**. And, in my preparation I realized that few of us have any personal experience of sheep outside of a petting zoo. That leaves us at a distinct **disadvantage** when we approach our **scripture lesson** today. Nearly everyone in Palestine in the time of Jesus would understand about sheep. But, two thousand years later we have to find out about them for ourselves.

So, with no experience with sheep I went about researching these unique critters. I quickly learned that most of what I assumed about sheep and lambs had come from movies and stories about the western frontier and the Australian outback. Of course, we all get started with the nursery rhymes, such as: “Mary had a little lamb...” And, once we get past that, we face the opposite extreme of movies and books, such as “The Silence of the Lambs,” with its creepy scenes of mental terror with Jody Foster and Anthony Hopkins. So, it’s no surprise that I knew few facts, but lots of myths. Having said all of this and forming my own conclusions, I am certain that some of you can correct or modify what I have said and will say about sheep in the next several minutes. I would really like to hear about that, but I ask you to hold the critique until after the benediction.

One of the first things you find in reading about sheep is that our bias about them is true: They like **being together**. They will follow the main leader just about anywhere. If there is no dominant leader, then they will follow the first sheep that moves. From this, we see absolute **loyalty** among the sheep, but not much resourcefulness or initiative. They need a leader. Most researchers believe that this submissive nature started about 6000 years before this encounter of Jesus and the disciples. That makes sheep the original domesticated animal for warmth and food: milk, meat, wool, and hides. They have an advantage in that they reproduce pretty readily. That is, they will multiply in number without much attention. However, they have **no real defense**. They are dependent on those taking care of them. And, that protector has been a human being for the past several thousand years.

So, this imagery, while unfamiliar to most of us still runs pretty deep, especially if you are **Palestinian** from the countryside listening to a local leader or evangelist in the early church. The stories they related likely included our scripture lesson today. Over time, they were collected and written by the author of the *Gospel of John* about 60 to 70 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At that time, the church was only beginning to form its structure and its patterns of worship. Lots of people had heard of the **The Way**, the Christian form of living in the world, and the outsiders remained curious.

Remarkably, the numbers of believers kept growing, primarily by word of mouth, but also through the **witness** of the believers themselves: People saw the giving and **generous nature** of these believers in Christ. Even the local **Roman rulers** wrote about it and stated that few people understood why the Christians acted in this way. In fact, no one outside of the believers could fully describe the accepting and non-judging way that the Christians interacted with **all manner of people**: Jewish, Greek, Roman, Arab, and African. Indeed, their ranks included Jewish followers and idol-worshipping pagans.

So, this is the background to this story of Jesus closing out this **third meeting** with the disciples in the final portion of the *Gospel of John*. The encounter began several verses earlier in *John 21*, and we dealt with the first part of our sermon last week, which included a miracle of catching fish, but also a reenactment of the **feeding of the 5000** and the **Last Supper** with Jesus. Now, with everyone fed physically and spiritually, Jesus turned to the subject of **leadership** and the future of the movement which started with Jesus and these same disciples at least two to three years earlier. Knowing that **Peter** was a natural leader among the disciples, Jesus addressed him three times. If you pay attention, Jesus was forcing an answer of **loyal service** from Peter. And, if you recall the time of that followed the arrest of Jesus, these three replies could have been a reversal of the three times that **Peter denied Jesus** before the crucifixion.

But, even beyond that Jesus used this image of leading and **tending sheep** in this rather intimate conversation that he had with Peter. “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” It seems a bit strange today, and you and I must make a leap beyond the literal sense of these words. Jesus was speaking figuratively, of course. The writer of this gospel used images of the sheep for Peter and the disciples, because it accurately reflected the **dependent relationship** that human beings have before **God and Christ**. And, the message of Christ was being transferred to Peter and the disciples, so that it could continue far **beyond Galilee and Palestine**.

Instead of using a complicated set of rules, Jesus told Peter to give of himself: to take care of those who came to him, just as a **shepherd** and landowner did for lambs and sheep. Peter would become a **leader of the disciples** and many other followers as the years passed. New experiences awaited Peter and all of the followers of Jesus. And, Peter would be called to use a **creative** form of leadership, carrying on the ministry of love and mercy that began with God and was made known to Peter and the disciples through Jesus Christ. Much was expected of these few who knew Jesus from the beginning. Today, we know that the early church formed from their efforts. But, like the thrust of this story the real **power came from God** in Jesus Christ: This continues today and will continue far into the future.

In this portion of the *Gospel of John*, Jesus came to the Sea of Galilee to have one final time together with the disciples. Thus far, Jesus had given them the gift of the **Holy Spirit**. What followed was a command to continue the work that began with Jesus in Galilee. There was no more training involved. These fishermen needed to take on **new roles**, new duties, and new responsibilities. Just like the efforts at fishing earlier in this final chapter in *John*, the results of their efforts would be far **more productive** through their relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Like the miraculous catch of fish, their accomplishments would exceed any effort that they could carry out alone, that is, without the power of Christ.

As you have probably realized, this was **the message** of the early church: helping others. It sustained the growth and advancement of **The Way**, as it was called, through about two hundred years, resulting in the spread of the Christian faith throughout the Mediterranean, the Roman Empire, and far beyond. The simple message from Christ himself ends with two words: "Follow me." (*John 21:19*) Peter, the disciples, and all of the unnamed people of the early church, did exactly that: They **followed Jesus**. They were people of action. They were people of sympathy. They were people of **kindness**. They fed the lambs and tended the sheep: **the flock** of uncertain and disadvantaged people who needed a kind hand, a gentle touch, a **caring word** of encouragement. The untended flocks consisted of meek people with many servants and slaves among them. They all needed and deserved the **love of God**. And, through Christ and the disciples and all who followed that is exactly what they received.

Jesus came to the disciples and began a conversation containing images of **sheep and lambs**. This was intentional. The images created many parallels to the ministry and the teachings of Christ. Instead of creating personal wealth, the efforts of Peter and the disciples combined with the **Holy Spirit** to produce the movement that became **Christianity**. In a similar way, the scriptures speak to us today. That is why we call it God's **Living Word**. That is why we prepare to hear it and give thanks for it after the Word is proclaimed.

Like those in the early church, you and I have **a lot left to do**. God does not outline it or make a strategic plan. Instead, we must do what we can each day for one another, but also for the lambs, the sheep, and the countless **flocks of people** that remain before us. This is God's will and **God's work**. It started through Christ and God's love. And, it continues to us today.

All glory to God who brings us this **Good News** in Jesus Christ.