

Today's message is the second in a series of sermons about Jesus' resurrection appearances. In this Gospel passage Jesus is restoring and commissioning Peter for sacrificial leadership.

By way of background, Jesus has appeared to the disciples as they had just finished fishing. They were invited to join Jesus on the beach to share in a meal of fresh fish and bread. From the passage it appears that Jesus was accompanied by Peter, Thomas, James and John and two other disciples who are not named. One can imagine the fishing boat was pulled up on shore along with the nets and other fishing supplies.

After the description of the meal, our passage for today begins. Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? More than these is not clearly identified. One might think that Jesus was asking if Peter loves Jesus more than he loves his fellow disciples. Or even more to the point, do you love me more than these disciples do? One would assume from the passage that Peter does love Jesus more than he loves his companions, but we cannot be sure that is the only explanation for this question. Consider a much different question: what if Jesus was asking Peter if he could detach himself from the way of life he knew and loved? It might be a question to ascertain if Peter was ready for a change of career from a fisherman to a full time disciple. Is he ready to walk away from the boat, the nets and the tackle, his friends, the only way of life he has known? So for us today, might we be asked, are you ready to give up some of the things that occupy your time, that give you satisfaction, to be a follower of Jesus?

Jesus pursues this question a total of three times. The gospel account takes note that Peter felt hurt because Jesus asked him "Do you Love me" a third time. I can just imagine that Peter flashed back to the three times he denied Jesus just prior to Jesus' crucifixion. But before we are too hard on Peter, consider a fact that is not readily apparent in the denial story. Most of the disciples fled the scene as soon as Jesus was arrested. Other than the Beloved Disciple, Peter was the only other disciple that followed Jesus to the scene of his trial. That took courage and commitment. Yes, he became frightened and denied knowing Jesus. But, all of the others had already beat feet.

Interestingly, Jesus did not mention Peter's denials. But the point is this: it may be hard to forgive others, but it can be harder sometimes to accept forgiveness. I am willing to bet here is not a one of us who does not have some lingering thing we have either done or not done that springs up in our consciousness from time to time. We may even have kept the event to ourselves.

This reminds me of a feature story on CBS Sunday Morning that aired last week. Frank Warren collects secrets from people who share their stories with him. He receives about 100 postcards a week. People anonymously share secrets they may not ever have told anyone before. He now has a collection of over a million regrets, fears, betrayals and confessions of all sorts. Here is one example. "My older neighbor let the weeds grow knee high in his yard. It looked terrible. Then he died and it dawned on me that he just needed help. I'm sorry." Frank Warren says: "I think when we keep a secret, it's really keeping us." He sees what he does as an invitation to reconciliation. I think this is part of the point of our Scripture story. This is about Jesus inviting us to be reconciled to him and to ourselves.

Look at how Jesus sees not only Peter but us. He sees the goodness in us, as someone He loves. So Jesus may be asking us, do we see the goodness in ourselves that He sees? Focusing on our failures can be a stumbling block to accomplishing the good things we are capable of doing in service to others. Think again about Peter. He is reinstated by Jesus and goes on to assume responsibility to care for the early Christian community.

Jesus commissions Peter to "feed my sheep," and "tend my lambs." Here is the commissioning of Peter to move on and disciple Jesus' new and upcoming followers. I am reminded of the commissioning services we do when we install and ordain new elders, deacons and pastors. We ask for a commitment to serve the members of the congregation and we promise to follow the example of Jesus and to love our neighbors and work for the reconciliation of the world.

Just who are the sheep and the lambs? To me they are any persons who are in physical, emotional and spiritual need. This goes beyond those persons we know to those who we meet outside of our family and acquaintances. It demands that we sometimes set aside our own personal desires or agendas, our nets, so to speak. I would propose that we can expand Jesus' command to include our world and its dwindling resources. As we begin to make plans for our future ministry, it

will be a challenge to balance the internal needs of Calvary's worshippers with those who are out in the community. It is not an easy assignment, but it was not an easy task for the disciples, either.

Feeding the sheep and the lambs is not some pleasant pastoral scene with sheep grazing and the sheep herders standing guard. Even in that job there were external threats from predators and other unsafe conditions. There will be times when we are asked to do projects or help people that will not be easy or even always pleasant. It may demand from us internal resources that we have not even accessed before. In fact, it may make us better disciples. Think about the disciple's hard lives and what they put up with. Imprisonment and often crucifixion. Yet, some of our most inspiring Scriptures were written by disciples while in prison.

So Jesus is asking us "Do you love me more than these?" Each of us will answer this question differently with regard to the phrase "more than these." However, I am sure that the answer to "Do you love me" is a strong Yes. No matter how each of us chooses to demonstrate our care for our sheep, we can be sure that Jesus accepts us just as we are. And that just as we are is free of past regrets. It is an open page where nothing today has been recorded. Our postcard is blank and we are free and reconciled. Thanks be to the Lord.