

April 25, 2004
Psalm 30, John 21:1-19
Dr. Lewis Galloway

“Feed My Sheep”

How is it that something can seem so ordinary and yet be full of surprises?

What surprises me the most about this last chapter in John’s Gospel is how it opens with such an ordinary scene. Easter Sunday is over. Another week has passed. Sometime later, the disciples return to Galilee, the place where everything began. The disciples go back to the rolling hills, wheat fields, olive groves, fishing boats, and small villages that hug the shore of the Sea of Galilee. What a humdrum way to end a Gospel that begins with the magnificent poetry of the first chapter: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1,14)”

After seeing the glory of the risen Lord, how could anyone return to the monotonous rhythms of everyday life? More than that, Chapter 21 seems like an afterthought. Chapter 20 provides a perfectly good ending to John’s Gospel with a summary and a call to faith. Did John discover some loose ends to tie up? Did he remember stories of the risen Lord he wanted to include even if they seem anticlimactic and out of place? Perhaps. Maybe there is something more as well. John wants us to see how the Lord meets us in the ordinary moments of life with a new call to serve.

When the story opens, the disciples are at loose ends—not sure what to do or where to go. Suddenly, Simon Peter says, “I don’t know about you, but I am going fishing.” The others quickly join him. Was he simply restless, bored or hungry? Maybe Peter was thinking of starting up the family business again. Peter, called by Jesus—called to leave his nets and fish for men and women—is out on the sea casting his nets for fish again. I suspect it felt good to be on the sea – to hear the sound of the nets slapping the water, to feel the waves rocking the boat, to see the moonlight casting shadows all about, and to hear the others talk about familiar things. After all he has been through, there is comfort in returning to life he had known.

They fish all night and catch nothing. Tired and frustrated, they listen to a voice from shore telling them where to cast the nets. Perhaps the stranger on the shore can see the school of fish churning the water and casting shadows on the sea. They do as he says. When the nets are overflowing with fish, Simon Peter realizes that the stranger is the Lord. In an ordinary moment and familiar action, he is awakened to the presence of the risen Lord.

The Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor tells of the moment when she was awakened to a sense of God’s presence in her life. She grew up in the Ohio countryside. Her family became active in a Methodist congregation. The young single

Methodist minister was a frequent visitor in her home. Taylor remembers how he listened to her and took interest in the projects that excited a 7-year-old girl. On Sunday, she heard him talk about the beauty of God's creation and how God cares for every part of it. He told of a young girl "who kept tadpoles in a birdbath so that she could watch over them until they turned into frogs." Taylor writes about how important that moment was in her life. "It was as if someone had turned on all the lights – not only to hear myself spoken of in church, but to hear that my life was a part of God's life, and that something as ordinary as a tadpole connected the two. My friend's words changed everything for me. I could no longer see myself or the least detail of my life in the same way again. When the service was over that day I walked out of it into a God-enchanted world, where I could not wait to find further clues to heaven on earth. (The Preaching Life, p. 15)"

Peter discovers the Lord's presence in the familiar places and activities of his life. When he discovers that the Lord is with them, it isn't just fishing nets that are about to break open. Simon Peter's life is breaking open too. Through the encounter with Jesus on the beach nothing in his life will ever be the same again.

When God's presence surprises us in the ordinary moments of life, we are changed. We sit with a friend who is having a tough time after the death of her husband and suddenly we know that we are not alone and that Jesus is with us sustaining us both. We are making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at the shelter when we see his eyes in the eyes of the homeless woman. We are driving down the road on another business trip lost in our troubled thoughts, when every blade of grass and every flowering tree catch fire with the presence of God. These ordinary moments become holy moments filled with the presence of the Lord. As Frederick Beuchner writes in *The Sacred Journey*, "I think of my life and of the lives of everyone who has ever lived, or will ever live, as not just journeys through time but as sacred journeys. (p. 6)" Awakened to the presence of the risen Lord, Peter's life and our lives become sacred journeys through time.

In that encounter with Jesus, Peter hears his call. Jesus touches the unfinished business and the loose ends of Peter's life:

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?
Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.
Feed my lambs.
Simon, son of John, do you love me?
Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.
Tend my sheep.
Simon, son of John, do you love me?

Peter is hurt because Jesus asks the question a third time. We imagine that Peter remembers the night around the fire in the High Priest's courtyard when three times he denied knowing the arrested Jesus. Now, Peter realizes that Jesus knows everything – his hope and his shame, even the dark places in his heart and his urgent desire for

faith.

You know everything. You know that I love you.
Feed my sheep.

What we cannot hear in the English version of this conversation is the shift that occurs in the Greek words Jesus and Peter use for sheep, knowing and love. While scholars may debate the subtle shifts in meaning that the changes in words suggest, no one can doubt that in this encounter Peter received a clear call to be a shepherd of Christ's sheep.

When the love of Jesus takes hold of our hearts it changes us and puts us on a new path. All the loose ends and unfinished business of our lives are woven together and completed in Christ. When we love Jesus more than anything else, we too receive the call to tend his sheep. We follow in his footsteps. We have a vocation. Every Christian has a calling. Our calling is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. It is unfortunate that we have diminished the word "call" by using it only to refer only of those called to the ministry of word and sacrament. Each one of us in this sanctuary has a call to ministry. We fulfill that calling whenever we live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our homes, our schools, our offices, and our relationships. In fact, the word vocation comes from the Latin word "to call." Our call is to be the people God created us to be. Our call is to let go of our fear, our indifference, and our uncertainty to follow Jesus in giving our lives in faithful service to others.

Sometimes we forget that the hard experiences, the mistakes, and even the failures of our lives are a necessary part of discovering who God wants us to be. It was true for Peter. It is true for us. As Parker Palmer writes in his book *Let Your Life Speak*, "Vocation does not come from a voice 'out there' calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God. (p. 10)"

The call of God is costly. Peter will discover that he will be carried where he does not wish to go. Barbara Brown Taylor said that it didn't take her long to find other signs of what it means to hear God's call. The once peaceful congregation in Ohio, where she once learned to sense God's presence in her life, erupted in a dispute over the Civil Rights movement when this young pastor insisted that the doors of the church were open to all. He was hanged in effigy and driven out of town. On that day, Taylor remembers, "I began to understand that God's call was not only wonderful but also terrible. (*The Preaching Life*, p. 15)" To answer God's call is a wonderfully, terrifying adventure of faith.

This past week in a seminar with our Lake Fellows, I heard Dr. Frieda Gardiner, the former Moderator of our General Assembly, paraphrase the words of Karl Barth: "When we say yes to God's ministry in Jesus Christ, we say yes to making Christ's ministry our own."

As the people of God of Second Presbyterian Church, we are at a point of discernment about our common calling to follow Jesus. How is God calling us to tend his flock and feed his sheep? At this moment, we are engaged in two very serious challenges in ministry. The first opportunity is to study our ministry in the inner city, where so many of Christ's lambs are a great need. We have formed a task force to discern what God is calling us to do in partnership with the Westminster congregation and Westminster Ministries of Presbytery. What is our calling to work with at risk children, to provide legal and other professional assistance to the poor, to feed the hungry, to share the Gospel, and to train youth for employment? My prayer is that in the coming years, we will make a bold and faithful response to needs of the people of our city. This ministry will be costly for it will ask us to commit our hearts, our time, our talents and our resources.

The second challenge in mission is to respond to the need for more space in our facility to carry out Christ's ministry through this location. I like to think of our church building as a mission station. Through our \$6.9 million dollar campaign to Light the Way to the Future we will build a facility to increase our capacity to provide clothes, food and furniture for those in need, increase our ability to welcome all seekers who come to worship, learn and serve, increase our space for our ministry of music and fine arts, and provide space for our dynamic and growing youth program. We have been blessed with a \$3 million dollar challenge gift from Dick McFarland in memory of his wife Sally. The only way we will meet this challenge by June 30 is for each one of us to commit our prayers and our resources to this campaign.

As we move into the future, it is essential that we discern Christ's presence among us and join together in accepting Christ's call to tend his sheep. The ordinary moments and the familiar places of our lives are filled with the glory of his presence.