

Sermon on John 21:1-19
Third Sunday of Easter, April 18, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ.....

Do you love me? If you do, how will I know? How will you show it? Another question, which is even more important: Do you love your family? If so, how do they know? How do you show it? And an even more question from God: Do you love Jesus? How will he know? How will you show it? This, my friends, is the question of the hour: how do you and I show love for one another, for our family, and for God? As you and I know, it cannot be just words only! For then the love we profess is just words, without any action to back them up. For in truth, actions prove the depth and meaning of our words. Acts of love make words of love real.

If you and I could be an invisible mouse in the corner of any home in America today, it might be interesting to listen to conversations within families. You might even hear someone ask their spouse, partner, or child: "Do you love me? Then please help me with the dishes!" Or we might hear, "Do you love me? Then help take out the trash!" Deeper questioning might reveal more. "Do you love me? Then why don't you say so? Or, why don't you act like it?" Such questioning betrays some tension that must be occurring in the relationship! We may even hear the question with deep urgency: "Do you love me? Then take care of our children, feed them, and keep them safe!" These are just some of the conversations we might hear, challenging one another to show love with actions consistent with the word.

So begins the second part of today's gospel lesson, in this resurrection appearance of Jesus with his disciples, and his conversation with Peter. The passage begins when the disciples went fishing, sometime after Jesus' resurrection appearances in the upper room with them on Easter evening, and a week later with Thomas. After all this the disciples had left Jerusalem and went to the seashore, where Peter decided to go fishing. After a long night of failure, catching nothing, Jesus appeared by the shore, though the disciples didn't know him. But when Jesus called out, suggesting they throw their nets to the other side of the boat, their nets were soon so full they could hardly pull in their catch! It was nothing short of miraculous, and that's when they recognized him. Peter jumped into the water, and all the disciples hurried to the shore, where they had breakfast with the one they now were sure was Jesus. Then Jesus broke the bread, and gave it to them, and they shared this simple meal of bread and fish. They didn't dare ask him who

he was, not wanting to appear foolish asking the obvious, so they ate in silent recognition that they were in the presence of the Lord.

That's when Jesus popped the question to Peter. "Do you love me?" Imagine yourself in Peter's place – having to live with the shame of having denied knowing Jesus three times after he had been arrested, because he was afraid, and now having to ask this question. He probably was ashamed, at the same time being joyful knowing that he was eating with Jesus. "Do you love me?" Jesus asked. And Peter said "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." So "feed my lambs." Then Jesus asked Peter again, "Simon, do you love me?" Peter had to tell him again, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And Jesus said, "Tend my sheep." Then Jesus said a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Now Peter was feeling hurt, as it was the third time Jesus had asked, just like on the night of his arrest and betrayal. So Peter said, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." And Jesus said to him again, "Feed my sheep." Not just "prove it." Or "say you're sorry for having denied me." Not even "go to the Temple and pray for thirty days in repentance for your denial." No, Jesus said to Peter "Feed my Lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." Not "prove you love me", but take your love for me and share it, witness to it with acts of love for all my children."

This conversation of Jesus with Peter is not a typical "confession and forgiveness" conversation which we might have imagined. That's why I think it was very real, and true to what happened. Instead of shaming him for his denial, Jesus gave Peter a challenge and an opportunity to love him more deeply than ever. He gave Peter (and the other disciples) responsibility for the care of those whom Jesus loved the most, a responsibility that Peter probably did not deserve! But he did, and thus Jesus showed his genius as a leader, calling unremarkable followers, even those who had denied knowing him out of fear, to great responsibilities as leaders in the Church that Jesus would build through them. It's a responsibility and a challenge that Jesus shares also with us today. For there are many more sheep in the flock Jesus calls his Church, and many both inside and outside the flock, whom you and I are invited and called to feed.

Like Peter, you and I are unlikely candidates for such responsibility! But just the same, Jesus has called you and me to be both followers and leaders in this Church, and called each of us to feed and tend his sheep. Are you feeling some tension about this? You should! Are you feeling some tension because Jesus continues to ask you "Do you love me?" – maybe even more than three times? Perhaps, like Peter, you remember vividly how often you have subtly denied Jesus or even knowing him. How? Well, how many times have you denied knowing Jesus yourself when you were under a little "peer pressure" about whether you are a Christian, or "one of those Lutherans in the ELCA?" Or when Christians do some of those things that make you cringe in Jesus' name, or things are said on

television by Christian preachers that you cannot believe were said, that seem to fly in the face of what you believe Jesus taught us about how to live, or how to love your neighbor. Or maybe a friend just asked, “Do you believe THAT?” And you suddenly turn silent, and can only say, “Well, no..... or I dunno.” Face it. There are plenty of times when you and I have denied Jesus and his Church, and don’t want to be bothered with taking care of all those irresponsible sheep!

So let me ask it again, Jesus’ question: “Do you love me? Do you love Jesus?” It’s Sunday morning, we’re all Christians, and we’re in Church, so can I assume that you all love Jesus? (Please say yes!) Good, that saves some time! Now for the challenge for us all: *Then feed my sheep!* What does Jesus mean when he tells us to do this, and who does Jesus mean for us to feed?

Traditionally in the Church we have often interpreted this passage meaning for Peter, the disciples, and all leaders to take care of the *people in the Church*. In Lutheran ordinations, this verse is quoted as part of a pastor’s “job description”. But from what we know about Jesus, who do you think Jesus means? I think Jesus means *everybody*, not just the baptized, not just the flock within the pasture, but all those sheep – human beings – within and without, who live in the world. Each one of us who follows Jesus is given this challenge (not just pastors!). And when we love Jesus, he calls us to feed *everyone* - Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, whatever....those who are citizens of this country and those who are not, immigrants, refugees, visitors, migrant workers, those on temporary visas and even those whom some consider “illegal”...actually, everyone who lives on this earth, that’s who Jesus means by “my sheep”! Can you live with that statement? I hope so, because this is my understanding, and it makes all the difference in the world for what we do in responding to Jesus’ challenge. This is how John’s gospel refers to Jesus’ great commandment “to love your neighbor as yourself.”

Finally, what does “feed my sheep” include? What does Jesus want you and me to do in obedience to his command to “love one another as I have loved you”, and to “feed my sheep” when we love him as we profess that we do? If this goes beyond merely “taking care of the people in the Church, or praying for the sick and homebound, and showing love for other Christians”, then what does it mean to “feed my sheep”? I invite you to turn to the person sitting closest to you and share in one sentence what you think this means. You have 30 seconds each. Go!

Now, was that hard to do? Perhaps. Perhaps not. It depends on whether this is something new, or if you have thought about this question before! But I will tell you what I think this means! It goes far beyond what a Lutheran pastor does in taking care of a congregation. It goes beyond praying and caring for the sick, teaching children the good news, or responding to the spiritual needs of our Christian brothers and sisters (though it does include all these things!). I believe *feed my sheep* caring for everyone about the welfare of all the people who live in

this neighborhood, in the city of St. Paul, throughout the metropolitan region, the State of Minnesota, this nation and the whole world! *Feed my sheep* means taking into account all that the people whom God has created need. We all need daily bread, which goes beyond food, and includes fulfilling work, education, opportunities for employment, access to transportation and to health care. So when the people around us do not have access to jobs, housing, education, employment, transportation or health care, we in the Church are challenged by God, through Jesus our Lord, to say and do something about that. This is what it means to tend and feed our Lord's sheep. It may mean providing food and shelter to people in need, it also means providing assistance in seeking employment, it means seeking justice in employment opportunities for all God's children – of all races, ethnicities, gender or age. It may mean challenging a mayor, a governor, a president, or an institution. It could mean challenging our own assumptions or prejudices so that we can care for all of God's sheep, not just those whom we know or think deserve such care. It means loving Jesus so that we love our neighbor enough to work for the common good of all, removing all the obstacles that stand in peoples' way. Working for the lives of our brothers and sister human beings on this earth as well as for their eternal life in heaven is what it means to "feed my sheep." And doing this all in the name of Jesus Christ, because we love our Lord, is the witness that will add the clarity and passion to this work.

You and I have abundant opportunities to tend our Lord's sheep, within the Church and without, through this congregation and through our work in the community. After worship I invite you to a forum downstairs to learn more about our neighbors who are immigrants, and the challenges they face, as we in the Church through Isaiah seek to tend and feed God's sheep by transforming attitudes and policies around immigration. The Lutheran bishops of Minnesota have invited us today to consider all the legislation being considered by our state legislature that affect people's lives – so that what our state does results not just from political partisanship but from a real concern for the life and health of everyone who lives here! We Christians can help shape this debate – among Republicans, Democrats, and Independents - through our prayers, letter writing, conversations with our representatives, and taking action in the public arena.

But in the end, it's not just what strategies we use and what we "do" that will transform this world into a place where all of God's children are tended and fed. It all starts right here, in our hearts, with the love we have for God and for each other. So do you love God? Do you love Jesus? Then tend God's sheep, feed God's people, love your neighbor and seek their good, in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.