

Feed My Sheep
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John 21:1-19

If you were here last week, our Easter reading was from the gospel of Mark and it ended rather abruptly, at least until later editors added on endings.

Well, this week we have the opposite situation. We are reading the last chapter in the book of John, and this is a last story, or alternative ending, that scholars know was added on to the gospel of John far later than the rest of the book was finished. It is a added ending, one last visit from Jesus to the disciples. Much like we talked last week about what happened next when thinking about the disciples after Jesus, this week we hear one more story about what happened next.

Jesus comes and meets the disciples on the shoreline, cooks them breakfast, and speaks to Peter and to all of them about what they were called to next in their lives.

I owe a lot to David Lose whose blog on this passage really framed this scripture passage for me. Lose reflects that Jesus does two things in this encounter that meet the deep needs that we all have as human beings.

- A sense of belonging
- A sense of purpose

First, to belonging:

The need to belong is a deep well within us. We want to belong, long to belong. We are created as social beings. We don't do well in isolation. We need to belong.

Lose writes, "And, just so we're not confused, belonging is different than fitting in. Indeed, it is the exact opposite (as many of us will remember from adolescence!). Fitting in is changing yourself to be acceptable to the group, whereas belonging is being found acceptable by your group just as you are. We all need to belong." (In the meantime, davidlose.net)

Much of Jesus' ministry was about bringing folks in, telling them they belonged. Assuring them they were loved by God and that the kingdom of God is theirs. Right now. That's what the Christian story is all about

To the Woman by the well who has been prostituting herself, you belong.

To the Lepers healed on the way, you belong.

To the Tax collector disciple Matthew, you belong.

To the Rich man whom Jesus loved deeply, you belong.

To the Children who were no more than property in early Christian times, you belong.

To the Woman who washes Jesus feet with her tears and wiped with her hair, you belong.

You belong regardless whether you fit in or not. You are accepted. As you are. You belong.

And old church story tells of a young university student named Bill. He had wild long hair, always wore the same old and torn T-shirt, jeans and no shoes. Across the street from the

university campus was a church. The people there were well to do, older and well-dressed. They wanted to help the university students nearby, but they did not know exactly how to do it.

Well, one day Bill decided to go visit this church by his university. As usual, he went wearing his jeans, old, torn T-shirt and his dirty long hair. The church service had already started and was full, so Bill walked down the center aisle looking for a seat. People were getting more and more uncomfortable as they watched this unclean, wild-looking young man. Finally, Bill got to the front and saw there were no more empty seats, so he just sat down on the floor right in front of the preacher. No one had ever done that in this church before! By now, everyone was upset and distracted.

Then, a respected old church deacon got up and started toward the front. Everyone was thinking: "You can't blame the deacon, someone really should deal with this disrespectful young man." Everyone was watching. Even the preacher stopped his sermon when the old man finally got to the front. Then, they were all completely surprised to see the old deacon drop his walking stick and very slowly sit down on the floor next to this young hippie. He did not want this young man to sit alone and feel unaccepted. (thinkaminute.com)

This is our ministry in the church too. To those feeling lost or without a place to be we say, "come, join us. You belong." We work to chip away our own sense of who is or is not acceptable, and instead offer this place, this gathering of people, this community as a place to belong.

In our Interim time together we have been working on building up this congregation as a place of acceptance and hope. That we can have differences of opinions and ideas. We can disagree. We can experience conflict. And still we can belong. All of us. No winners and losers. We can belong in the midst of difference and be the church.

Belonging is essential.

When we look at today's scripture we ask, why does Jesus ask Peter three times if he loves him?

The last time Peter stood by a charcoal fire he failed miserably three times. You know that had to be eating away at him. Yes, all the disciples failed Jesus on his last night, but Peter had loudly proclaimed that he would never deny Jesus. And then just hours later does the very thing he swore he would not. Shame, and doubt, and self-loathing had to follow.

So here it looks like Peter is reliving that experience. Yet, Jesus has a deeper purpose. The threefold denial is redeemed by the threefold affirmation.

- Yes, I love you.
- You know that I love you.
- Please Jesus, you know I love you.

And in this way Peter is rehabilitated. Freed to live once again as a disciple with Jesus' forgiveness and blessing. He once again belongs

The second part of Jesus' message is a sense of purpose. We all need purpose in our lives, too.

Steve Taylor in Psychology Today writes:

"Purpose is closely related to hope. Working towards a goal implies that we feel that the goal is attainable, and that our lives will change for the better once we have reached it. It implies hope - depending on our type of purpose, hope for a better life for ourselves, a fairer and more just society, liberation from suffering and oppression for others, a healthier world, and so forth."

We need a purpose.

Some life transitions can be hard. Going from being a working person to feeling unproductive and purposeless in retirement. Going from being a parent to feeling lost as an empty nester. Going from being an able bodied member of society to living with a disability that changes how we can participate or are welcomed. And sometimes we just can't seem to find our way in life. We need a purpose.

The disciples needed a purpose, too. They were lost after Jesus died. What were they supposed to do? They couldn't go back to their families defeated and lost. They had no status. They had no work. They couldn't be in Jerusalem for fear of their lives. What were they supposed to do without Jesus? They try fishing all night and catch nothing. Not even their old occupation brings them purpose!

And then there is Jesus on the shore, Jesus feeding them breakfast, Jesus saying to them, feed my sheep. Take care of my lambs. Feed my sheep.

This is your purpose, says Jesus. A life's purpose that you can do without needing me to be there with you. You know who my sheep are--the poor the disenfranchised, the lonely, the lost, the grieving. Those who need to know they belong. Feed those sheep. Love those sheep. Accept those sheep. As they are.

As the disciples see Jesus, they understand that Jesus will always be out there in front of them. Like we talked about last week: I go ahead of you says Jesus. And then we see the folks in front of us that need our help. We see the sheep. And are called to feed the sheep.

And we know the disciples figure this out. We know they do because we inherit a church that is built on opening doors to all as Jesus did. Feeding sheep as Jesus asks us.

As many of you know, on Tuesdays I teach students working on getting their GED or high school diploma. Honestly, it can be difficult. We have limited resources and lots of paperwork. The students can be challenging as they have nearly insurmountable life challenges they carry with them: living in a domestic violence shelter, drug addiction, hard attitudes built over years of feeling rejected and stupid. Success in our program varies. Sometimes it seems pretty thin.

But this past Friday I was a presenter at the statewide conference of adult educators, a gathering of 600 people. At that conference I was reminded of why I teach, why I do what I do. Our work is about these very same two tasks:

We are about giving people a sense of belonging. Because not having your high school diploma is an alienating thing. A person feels outside. And in many ways you are kept outside of things as you can't join a union, can't serve in the military, can't get your barber's license, can't be a manager at McDonalds, can't join the national guard without your diploma. With it, you can belong. Advance. Provide for your family.

Also, we give people a purpose. We ask them what they are going to do next. We help them dream beyond where they are. We help them take the next step out of poverty or out of despair.

On Friday I was reminded of all that. Feed my sheep, says Jesus.

I came away from the conference with a renewed sense of purpose for that part of my work. That I can feed these sheep, the sheep in our program. Feed them with knowledge but also that they are worthwhile, that I SEE them, and that they matter.

We are here today because we believe in this Easter promise. That Jesus rose from the dead, that we don't have to be afraid, that we will never be alone, that there is more. And then, as the readers of the gospel of John and those of us here and now, we ask what happened next, and are given a purpose.

Accept people where they are. Give them a sense of belonging. And feed them. Sometimes literally. Sometimes feeding them with hope, with education, with advocacy, with housing, with a place to come and be safe on a Sunday morning.

The sheep await us. They are hungry. Let's get moving.
Amen.