

“Love Is A Verb”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

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John 10:11-18

‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

John 21

Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will go with you.’ They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, ‘Children, you have no fish, have you?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said to them, ‘Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, ‘It is the Lord!’ When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off.

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, ‘Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.’ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish. 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.’

Please pray with me. Gracious God, you offer us the word for nourishment, for wrestling, for questions, for learning, for wisdom. Be with us now as together we consider your word to us this day. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

The lectionary readings today really focused on the image and the role of the shepherd. The call to worship is based on the Psalm for the day, Psalm 23, and David read the first gospel reading about Jesus as the good shepherd. And as I

thought about that image of the shepherd, this morning's second gospel reading came to mind. The one about Jesus talking to Peter about feeding the sheep. And this reading, like the ones from the last two Sundays that Tom Glen and David preached on, give us a glimpse into the life in the days after Jesus's death. I hadn't really thought about it in depth before, but I began to realize just how difficult it must have been for them as they struggled with their fears and disbelief and grief. I mean, we celebrate Easter and launch right into its resurrection message with joy but it's not so easy for them. Simply put, they're trying to wrap their heads around what happened. The events of the previous day have been a nightmare and Jesus keeps appearing and disappearing and reappearing. He's no longer with them the way he used to be. So we can understand why it's such a difficult time.

Now, two weeks ago, Thomas preached on Jesus appearing in the locked room. Not once but twice because Thomas is from Missouri and he said, "Show me." And so Jesus came back and showed him. Last week, we heard about the story connected to the Road to Emmaus. Two people who are grieving about the loss of Jesus and share the story with a stranger on the road and it's only later when he breaks the bread that they realize who it is, and they are overjoyed and return to Jerusalem to tell the disciples. But we find the anxiety and fear still reign. They're still trying to figure it all out. They're not any different from any one of us who's grieving the loss of someone and trying to figure out what's next. So in this morning's reading, we're told about the third appearance of Jesus. The disciples are out fishing, they catch nothing. A stranger comes along, tells them to put out the nets, and they become heavy with fish. Then they realize it's Jesus.

And we see how much this story parallels the story about the original calling of the disciples. They were fishermen out in the boat when a stranger tells them after they have had empty nets, try once more, and they're overwhelmed with the amount of fish they get. When they come to the shore, Jesus calls them to follow him and that's when they begin their ministry. So I think this morning's story sort of brings it full circle. They've been separated and now they are together with him again. So each of these stories begins with a conversation between Jesus and his followers. For those in the locked room and those on the Road to Emmaus, it's a powerful moment for them. Jesus offers words of peace and healing after a very traumatic time. And he helps them, as David said last week, move from fear into faith. Peace I give to you. The feeling I have every time I read this is that Jesus is saying, "I know it was hard. Most of you left me in fear. I understand. I know this is hard to believe, but I am here and it's okay." The same things happens in this morning's reading. The disciples pull in that huge catch of fish and they realize it's Jesus. And he says, "Come. Eat breakfast," something that would go on in a lot of our houses in the morning. They eat a breakfast of fish and bread. And they see him, they hear him, they watch him, they eat with him. It's an affirmation of his real presence. And Jesus senses all the traumas they've been through, and seeks not only to ease their fears in the moment, but to help them heal from the ups and downs, and the loss, and the change. He does not chastise them, he nourishes them. And he puts them on the road to healing.

I watched an episode of 60 Minutes, and I know I often bring those up, but I love 60 Minutes. And this one was with Oprah Winfrey. And she talked about trauma-informed therapy as one of the episodes. It begins at a place now called Saint A's in Milwaukee. It was a Catholic orphanage founded in 1850 for children who had lost their parents in the cholera epidemic. But now they have begun a program that's different. They are a place for children and youth who have been abused. Saint A's offers a program for these children and youth, and young mothers who have experienced abuse. And they use a technique called trauma-informed therapy. The trauma might be physical, or sexual, or verbal. It might be just living in a place where violence goes all around them. And they realized how important the healing was because research showed that children exposed to this often didn't develop well with brain development. It also showed that many of them became depressed. And it showed that they often ended up with a shorter life span. So they've worked on this for quite some time. And Alicia Fox was one of the young women that Oprah interviewed. She was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. She had been abused by her father for 10 years, and she didn't know where to turn, and she was suicidal.

She was finally able to tell her grandmothe and the police, about what was happening. And she received that kind of trauma-informed care. She found it very meaningful because it wasn't something that focused on behaviors that needed to be corrected like delinquency, or bad grades, or explosive anger. It focused on, "Tell me what happened to you." The director there said, "If you begin with 'what's wrong with you? why are you acting like that?'" it sounds like, "How can we fix you?" But by saying, "What happened to you?" it's a very different question. Alicia said when they asked me those questions, I felt like someone understood. They weren't trying to calm me down or fix me up, they just listened

and they really wanted to help. "I no longer feel like damaged goods," she said, "I'm a survivor and I've learned to deal with the fears, the anxieties, and the numbness I used to feel."

Over 50,000 people have been trained in trauma-informed care by the people from Saint A's. They've gone all over the world. They work with teachers, and therapists, and foster families, and social workers. The local police in courts in Milwaukee have had training. And now, judges asked youths, "What happened? Not, "What are you doing this?" And someone told me today that the officers in schools in Saint Louis are trained in this program as well. One of the therapists said, "If I don't ask what happened, how can I really understand? If I ask them what happened, it helps me to realize why they're acting the way they do. It's only then that we can help them put their life back together." The key line for me was, they weren't trying to fix people, they were trying to heal them. They were trying to help them heal in a powerful way. And I think that's the way Jesus talked with his beloved disciples. He cared, he offered words of healing. And in so doing, he offered words of hope.

I think, too, in John's passage today, it goes a little bit further when the focus shifts to Peter. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" "You know that I love you." "Feed my lambs." Again he asks, "Do you love me?" "Yes." "Then tend my sheep." Again, "Peter, do you love me?" By now we're told that Peter is hurt. "You know that I love you." "Feed my sheep." It's interesting though, three questions asked, three questions answered. Scholars say that these three movements are the coming of full circle for Peter denying Jesus three times. Through this conversation, Jesus brings reconciliation and begins to help Peter to heal as well. I also think that when Jesus talks to Peter about the sheep, he's widening the circle. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Not only do I offer peace to you, but in time, you should bring peace to others. Tend my sheep, feed my sheep, love my sheep. They're being told to head out and move on and share that kind of faith with those beyond themselves. To tend and to feed and to care for others. Not only those who are well, but those who are lost and hurting. And this is where I think the imagery of the shepherd and the sheep becomes so powerful.

In his book, Ken Bailey wrote on the good shepherd, he reminds us that the sheep and shepherd is a very powerful cultural image in that part of the world. And in the reading that David shared, he talked about the hired hand. Bailey tells us, the hired hand isn't going to stick around when things get tough. The hired hand will run off but not the shepherd. The shepherd sticks with it. They tend, they feed, they keep the sheep safe. And when they're lost, they go and look diligently for them. They don't yell or shame them when they find them. They just bring them back. And if they've been hurt in the process, they will tend their wounds as well. I think Jesus is telling the disciples that like he is, they are and we are to be the shepherds of the people of God. To seek out those who are lost and wandering and need to be found, those who hunger and need to be fed, those who are hurting and need to be healed.

And this is where love comes in, for this is the kind of love that heals. The love that Jesus called us to share. This kind of love is not about fixing people, it is about helping them heal. I think in our culture, we are so fixated on fixing. We are fixated on it. Fixing bad behavior, wanting people to get over loss or change right away. We would rather fix than listen and heal. But Jesus says, "No, there's another way. We do not shame, we offer peace." He offers love and hope to his disciples, forgiveness and healing. He knows they have been through a difficult time. And then, he reminds them when they're ready to move on, they should offer healing as well. Not to fix people, but to help them heal. For when we help others heal, we help to heal the world. So may we do so in the name of the prince of peace who offers us peace from beyond this world. Amen.