

**“The Once and Future Church”**  
**Text: John 21:1-17**  
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*Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” John 21:17b*

We thought the gospel had ended. John’s Gospel, that is. The last two verses of chapter twenty appear to bring the story to a fitting end, reminding the reader that Jesus did many other signs that could not be recorded in this book, imploring the reader to believe that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. These final sentences provide a tidy conclusion to the narrative, obeying the three rules of preachers and writers everywhere: tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them.

John has accomplished all of these tasks and then he puts down his pen. We expect to see the words, “The End,” scroll across the screen. Instead, we find these words: “After these things, Jesus showed himself again to the disciples...” and another story begins. Why would John choose to tell one more story, after such a definitive ending? Perhaps he is like the preacher who has an illustration so powerful and moving that it must be told, even if it has nothing to do with the sermon being preached. Beware! Some Biblical scholars say that this epilogue wasn’t written by John at all, but by some later editor. It sticks out like a sore thumb, tacked on to the end of the gospel. And yet, there it is, in your Bible and in mine, John chapter twenty-one, awkwardly positioned **after** the conclusion.

Awkward as it is, though, this story has much to offer to those of us who struggle to have faith and the church that struggles for relevance and authenticity in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Its very existence offers us the helpful reminder that gospels do not end the way novels and movies most often do. As one preacher writes, “it is deeply satisfying to get to the end of a detective novel or a romantic comedy and have the sense that closure has been achieved—the crime has been solved, the couple has found true love—partly because we have to live in a world of constant disruption where closure never really happens.”<sup>[i]</sup> Literary critic Barbara Hernstein Smith has written that this kind of closure, “allows the reader to be satisfied by the failure of continuation or, put another way, it creates in the reader the expectation of nothing.”<sup>[ii]</sup>

The expectation of nothing. This is precisely the posture of the seven disciples we meet at the beginning of John 21. For three challenging and blessed years, they have walked the road of ministry with Jesus. They have seen miracles and heard stories of the world turned upside down. Their lives transformed by an encounter with God, they left it all behind to follow him Jesus. But now, after the tragedy of the cross and the joy of

resurrection, after the words of comfort and the challenging commands, after all that has happened to this group of friends, the sense of expectation seems to have faded so quickly. We find that this group of fishermen turned disciples have reverted to their former occupations. "I'm going fishing," Peter says, and the rest agree that it is a good idea. The expectation of nothing. Back to normal. Time to fish.

It is at this point that the conclusion is disrupted. The resurrected Jesus appears on the beach complete with charcoal fire and a breakfast of loaves and fish. Both of these details have relevance in John's story. The last time we saw a charcoal fire Peter was warming his hands while denying his Lord in the courtyard. The last time we saw loaves and fish, five thousand people were fed. These symbols reenter the story and the story continues. The message is clear. We were wrong to assume that the gospel had ended, not because there is one more chapter but because there will always be one more chapter. Gospels do not end. The work of the church must continue. And so Peter, a fitting stand-in for disciples everywhere who have tried to follow, who have failed to follow, and have tried again, receives his instruction from Jesus. Feed my sheep. It is a mission statement for the once and future church; it is a call to action and to discipleship. It is a word of promise and of challenge. It is the gospel imperative in a nutshell: if you love me, feed my sheep.

In seemingly all sectors of American society, from the classrooms of our universities to the front pages of our newspapers to the water coolers and coffee pots of our office buildings; from church fellowship halls to congressional hearing rooms; from the Glenn Beck show to the Daily Show with Jon Stewart, people are talking about the role of religious faith in wider culture. The conversation, of course, is not new; nor are the divergent viewpoints on how faith should impact and influence the wider realms of society and culture. Still, the rhetoric has been so heated and the views so polarized, that these old debates are being given new life in recent months through media accounts and political posturing. The debates also come at a particularly daunting time for Christian communities all over the globe. A time when the gospel message is threatened by the violent intentions of a Christian militia group and by still more stories of sexual abuse by religious leaders and deliberate suppression by the institutional church. Add these stories to the by-now ubiquitous accounts of declining numbers and influence and you have what amounts to an identity crisis in the Christian church. Like the disciples who robotically picked up their fishing nets with little expectation and even less hope, the church is suffering from a lack of vision for the future.

The question might be most pointedly asked in this way: what is a church for? It is one that is being asked now and one that the disciples might also have asked on the shore of Tiberias.

The way we Presbyterians answer these most consequential questions of faith is by turning to the words of scripture and particularly to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. In one of our more countercultural practices in a society obsessed with the newest ideas

and products, we look back to the great stories of faith in order to gain a vision for the future. Believing that there is always one more chapter, that God is still speaking and calling and providing, we trust and study these ancient words of truth and hope.

And, like the disciples, we are encountered by a living God who is, you guessed it, on the move; ahead of us, calling us forward. We come to Jesus, as our first ancestors in the faith came to him, with despair and longing and with this question: What is a church for?

But Jesus, never one to neatly settle a debate with a conclusive answer, and tidy conclusion, offers Peter (and all of us) a simple command that is perhaps the most bewildering instruction one could imagine. If you love me, feed my sheep.

As you can imagine, these few words of Jesus have been interpreted in many different ways by the church through the years. In our age of polarization and dichotomy, those interpretations tend to fall into two camps, creating two seemingly distinct or even opposite **types** of Christians and churches. On the one hand, there are those for whom the command to feed sheep is a call to be about the work of justice and compassion in the world. Feeding sheep involves serving meals at soup kitchens and providing clothing for children and giving to relief efforts in areas devastated by natural disaster. Feeding sheep also involves protesting on the steps of the capitol and advocating for justice and equal opportunity. These Christians and these churches are most often labeled with the suddenly pervasive phrase, “social justice.”

On the other hand, there are Christians and churches who interpret the command to feed sheep as a call to proclaim the word of God to everyone we meet. To feed sheep is to convert family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and sometimes even complete strangers. To preach the gospel truth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that through accepting and believing this, you will have abundant life both now and for eternity. Feeding sheep involves giving testimony to the ways in which Christian faith has changed your life and how it might do the same for others. These Christians and these churches are most often labeled with that term rarely uttered in some Presbyterian sanctuaries: “evangelical.”

If the church chooses to operate by principles of societal and political bifurcation, then we have a choice to make. Will we be social justice Christians, or will we be evangelical Christians? We need to make a choice, the story goes. Why? Well, so that we can be labeled. And in a culture that must have neatly polarized categories and conclusions, labels are everything. So, which are we? Which are you?

Perhaps my mocking tone has given away my own distaste for this kind of extreme dichotomy. The church of Jesus Christ does not have to submit and acquiesce to the labels forced upon us by the systems in place all around us. In fact, the church must not submit to this kind of division if we are to be about the mission of God in the world. Are

we called to be about acts of justice and mercy in the world? Absolutely. Are we called to be about the work of evangelism, sharing the gospel truth with the world? Absolutely. Simply scan the life and ministry of Jesus Christ in the gospels, and you will encounter both imperatives in abundance. When considering the mission of the church in the world, in ours or any age, we need not be restrained by language of “either-or.” Above all we must not allow the hatred and distrust that comes with this language to invade our churches.

In 2004, Dr. Peter Storey, Professor of Ministry and former Methodist Bishop of Johannesburg, South Africa, preached the baccalaureate sermon for the graduating class of Duke Divinity School. I snuck in the back of the chapel to hear Dr. Storey, because I love good sermons and had heard of his wonderful preaching. The text he chose for these ministers to be was the one that we just heard from the Gospel of John. In the sermon, Dr. Storey described what stands at the center of the Christian ministry, “When we peel away all the other stuff, the beating heart of all ministry is very personal –it’s all about relationship – about an encounter, a question, a command. Everything comes down to these. From the encounter between Jesus and Peter, we learn much about ourselves, but more about Jesus.”

It is all about relationship, all about forgiveness. At this point those who believe that Christian living is about giving testimony and redeeming souls might be cheering in agreement. But Dr. Storey’s sermon was not over yet. This man, who had been a national leader in the struggle against apartheid and had suffered for his unpopular views, had more to say about the heart of all ministry.

To these graduating seminarians, he continued, “Until you lead your congregation to engage with that real world, your pastoring will be mere pampering – your proclamation will be a religious form of talking to yourself. It’s only too easy to slip into that self-deceiving mode: some of the very people who speak most about reaching the world are right now directing a ruthless civil war inside the church, all about keeping some people out. For shame! For shame! So you must resist with all your might the temptation to play ‘church’ while the world bleeds.”[\[iii\]](#)

In the back row of the chapel, I hurriedly grabbed a pen and wrote on a pew card those words: “Resist with all your might the temptation to play ‘church’ while the world bleeds.”

In order to have a future in a troubled and polarized world, the church must move beyond simplistic reductionist reasoning that will only divide our congregations, decrease our numbers, minimize our impact, and compromise our foundational mission. Don’t you want to be part of a “both-and” revolution in the Christian community? Don’t you feel a movement, beginning in churches like this one, to discard the old categories and put to bed the agendas of division and focus on the essential tenets of our common faith? All are welcome, all are loved, all are called to worship and serve God with heart and mind and soul and strength.

They were having lunch at the monastery, all the monks together. And at the beginning of the meal the bread was brought out and passed around the table. The youngest monk took a piece of bread and bit into it and said, “this is the best bread I’ve ever had, I have never tasted such good bread before. Tell me, did we bake this bread or was it given to us?” The older monk answered, “Yes”.

What is the mission of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? How can we best show our love for God and feed God’s sheep? Should we preach the gospel of salvation and forgiveness, or should we engage in ministries of justice and compassion in the world? Yes. Yes. Yes.

Amen.

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[i] Thomas G. Long, “Easter – The Extra Scenes?” in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2010. p. 32.

[ii] Quoted by Thomas G. Long, “Easter – The Extra Scenes?” in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2010. p. 32.

[iii] This sermon is available at [www.divinity.duke.edu/docs/faculty/sermons/BaccalaureateStorey2004.pdf](http://www.divinity.duke.edu/docs/faculty/sermons/BaccalaureateStorey2004.pdf)