

FEED MY SHEEP

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The Third Sunday of Easter

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I realized as I began to study for today that I have written a reflection on this day of the lectionary before. However, last time I made the mistake of eating at Chili's on Saturday evening. Later that night, I was persecuted by a Saul of the food poisoning variety and I had to text my rector that I could not come the next day. Someone else had to read what I had written. After that experience, I started fresh for today. And I will never again eat at Chili's.

After that questionable story, I want to start with a more edifying idea from one of my favorite television shows, *Call the Midwife*. I love this show and highly recommend it. It has a lot to tell us about community and spiritual care while meeting people's physical needs. This is said by Sister Julianne: "I have come to the conclusion that there are only two reasons for ever doing anything. One is love, and the other is fear." **One is love and the other is fear.** Our first reading from Acts and our Gospel story both illustrate people who acted wrongly out of fear, but Jesus changed them so they began acting out of love instead.

In Acts, Paul has been persecuting the new church. I do not know what his fears were and we are not told that he is persecuting them out of fear. But look around our world and you will see how often fear drives bigotry, hatred, and persecution. I imagine that Putin's motivation for war has at the heart of it some fear as well as his narcissism. There's a reason some bigotry is labeled as phobia. Something fearful is likely driving Saul as he breathes threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.

But then he is confronted by the resurrected Christ and his life is forever changed. He becomes the Paul we know from the rest of the New Testament. He goes from being a vengeful persecutor to proclaiming the good news of Jesus. He goes from a hateful attacker to a defender of the faith. He turns from acting out of fear to acting out of love.

Then in the Gospel, we have Peter. Y'all, I love Peter. I asked to preach today when I saw there was a Peter story to talk about. Peter is such a big brazen hotheaded doofus for much of the gospels, but still, he becomes a leader of the early church. If anyone is an advertisement for God's grace and God taking the unlikeliest people and making them his instruments to change the world, it's Peter.

He likes to be the first to blurt out the answer and sometimes he gets it right and is called the Rock on which Jesus will build the church and sometimes he gets it wrong and is told "get behind me, Satan." He declares he's willing to lay down his life for Jesus and is the one who cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant in a moment of brave idiocy. Then soon after he denies even knowing Jesus. It is just heartbreaking to consider how this lovable, brash, bighearted man acts when in the grip of fear. His fear overtakes him when he sees Jesus in the hands of the authorities—when the danger gets real.

And that brings us back to today's text. The disciples have been through serious trauma. They have also seen the resurrected Jesus. Their lives are a turmoil of change and strong emotions. So, like many people when faced with great change, they seek out the familiar. For them, that means they're back on a boat on the Sea of Galilee, fishing. (It says Sea of Tiberias in our text, but that's just a different name for the same lake.) So, they are back where they started when Jesus first called them to follow him. And just like it can happen in any life, the extraordinary happens in that ordinary place.

Jesus will call out to your proverbial boat in the most trivial moment. If you're lucky, you'll have a friend like John nearby who will point the moment out to you. Peter had that friend and responded in the most Peter of ways—by leaping out of a boat again—this time not to walk on water but to get to Jesus as quickly as possible. Even after denying him in his paralyzing fear, he's ready to leap again. Bless his heart. And I don't

mean that in a sarcastic way like we said it back in Texas. Truly, bless him. What an example for us of a big heart open to change.

Now we come to the breakfast on the beach. Jesus is grilling fish and bread—like my husband does burgers and hotdogs—on a charcoal fire. By the way, this is not what I would call a barbecue. I hear people call it that, but that's not barbecue, that's just grilling. Grilling is when you throw a few burgers and hot dogs on a charcoal or gas grill and cook them quickly with high heat; barbecuing is an all-day event with slowly smoking meats. Either one can be a time for celebration and spending time with friends, and that is what is happening in our story.

Jesus feeds them breakfast before he gets down to business with Peter. He meets physical needs before addressing the spiritual. Now here I want you to think about when we last saw a charcoal fire in the book of John. You may remember that it was in the courtyard of the high priest, where Peter joined a group of people warming themselves around a charcoal fire—the same courtyard where he denied Jesus three times. It's no accident that John mentions a charcoal fire both times—it's an obvious linking of the incidents and John is a careful writer.

Three times he denies knowing Jesus, and now three times Jesus asks him, "Do you love me?" and tells him, "Feed my sheep." Just as Jesus fed his disciples, we must feed others. Many times, this is taken to mean only in a spiritual manner. But I think it also means we should feed people. Our call is to meet the needs of people. Healing and wholeness come in physical ways as well as spiritual. We are called to feed souls and to feed bodies.

Beloved community starts with the Eucharist. Some of our best experiences in the church and outside the church have come with meals and fellowship. Jesus is great at meeting people's physical needs as well as their spiritual needs. Think of how often he combined teaching with feeding, forgiving with healing, and foot-washing with feasting.

Jesus not only feeds his friends, but he asks them to bring their own catch. Sometimes the best parties are potlucks where everyone contributes to the meal. The same is true of our work today. We feed the sheep as a team. We work together and call on one another to do our part. He also says "**Follow me.**" Just as when he first met them at the Sea of Galilee, so he calls them again to follow him. Their work has only begun and now they must follow and feed the sheep.

It's meaningful that Peter was even invited to this breakfast and given this grace after his denials. It is meaningful that Jesus called out even to him and that he took that leap into the water. Jesus loves with such grace and abundance, and we are to follow and do the same.

We are not just to feed the easy sheep, the ones who are cuddly and cute, the ones who are perceptive and slower to act like John. We are called to feed the real ornery hotheaded sheep, too. The ones who really need their woolly coats sheared and their hooves trimmed. The ones who are a bit cantankerous. The ones who don't fit in with the rest of the flock. We are to feed them all in love—feed their bodies and souls.

Now we know that Peter's life changed. We never see him act in fear again after this time. We see him boldly proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. We see him leading and teaching. We see him learning from a vision involving food—again food is a key part—to expand his flock of sheep beyond his own community. We see him become a great leader and a saint—all because he answered the call to act out of love and not out of fear. He and Saul-turned-Paul are examples of messy guys acting out of fear who learned to love Jesus and feed his sheep.

May we act not in fear but in love and may we always feed the sheep in our own community and beyond.