

April 18, 2010

JOHN 21:1-19

1 *After these things* Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. 2 Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. 3 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.

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." 6 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. 7 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 sea. 8 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.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 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. 13 Jesus came and *took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.* 14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 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.**" 16 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.**" 17 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.** 18 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." 19(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, "**Follow me.**"

The lesson began with the words, “*After these things* Jesus showed himself again...”

Since the setting of our story for this morning’s gospel lesson is after the resurrection of the Lord, “these things,” must include things like Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalene, his appearance to the disciples without Thomas being present; his appearance to the disciples a week later when Thomas was present, and, “many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book,” but which “were written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

In the middle of all of this there appears to be a quiet struggle going on among the disciples to discover who will take Jesus’ place as the rabbi or teacher.

In that light, it’s interesting what John’s gospel left out about Simon Peter. There is nothing in John about Peter’s denial (only that Jesus foretold it). I wonder if John even knew about that tradition, or if he purposely avoided mentioning it for fear of discrediting the most outspoken of the disciples. There is no account of Jesus’ struggle at Gethsemane. Did John even know about it? And if he knew about it, did he omit that account in order to spare the embarrassment of the *Son of God* pleading for his life

Meanwhile the baton must be passed, but to whom? Simon Peter had a primary role in the gospel tradition, but what was all of that information being passed on in the Fourth Gospel about John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, or “the beloved disciple”?

The issue was clearly resolved in this morning’s lesson where Simon Peter and not John, was given the marching orders: “Feed my lambs,” the Lord commanded. “Tend my sheep.” “Feed my sheep.” And then the final command, “Follow me.”

One of the great traditions from the earliest church that we find in John’s Gospel was the image of Jesus as a shepherd. I admit it is humbling when we think about it: Jesus Christ relates to us like we relate to sheep and lambs. I don’t know much about sheep but I have heard that they aren’t very smart. I have also heard that they are very vulnerable; even if they were intelligent, without fangs, claws, and attitude, they don’t stand a chance against the predators that roamed the lands during the time of Jesus. We see sheep as being dumb and vulnerable. Is that how Jesus sees us?

In the Gospel of John it is clear that the Lord wasn’t going to leave us to fend for ourselves. If he thought of his followers as sheep, he knew we wouldn’t have much of a chance. And so it was that some became feeders, some tenders, and all became followers.

I for one do not like being compared to a sheep. I’ve never known anybody who understood being compared to a sheep as a compliment. Only in the Bible is it tolerable. If “the Lord is my Shepherd, (and) I shall not want,” then it’s marginally OK. If Jesus is the good Shepherd, then I can deal with being part of his flock; but in no other setting am I willingly going to be anybody’s sheep, or part of any woolly flock. That’s because sheep are reputedly dumb and helpless. I don’t want to be thought of in that way.

Still, I know I'm not the brightest star in the constellation. Because of that I am vulnerable and if I had a nickel for every dumb thing I've said or done, for every time somebody told me to, "Shut up!" and I thought they said, "Stand up!" For every time I thought, "No guts, no glory," I could have retired long ago. You all probably aren't like that. You don't do dumb things, do you? You don't confuse shut up with stand up. You follow the advice of Jesus who instructed his disciples to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves," right? And even though you trust everybody at the table, you still cut the cards, right? And better not buy a pig in a poke, or look a gift horse in the mouth. Well maybe yes and maybe no.

If you have ever entertained the notion of reading the Bible cover to cover, and several people have done that-- I am not among them-- but I did start to do that once, and I realized early on that if the biblical witness has any credibility, at least the ancient authors believed that people weren't too bright, and that by and large we are quite vulnerable. Somebody needs to look after us. We need a shepherd, someone who can feed us and tend us such that we are able to follow. Without a shepherd we might become prey for any talking snake we happen to encounter in our garden.

We might believe we are smart, even street smart. We might believe we won't fall for any shady tricks. We are worldly wise enough to realize that something for nothing will wind up being me paying out something and getting nothing in return. We know that if something is too good to be true then it probably is neither. But I learned from watching my share of westerns at the Saturday Matinee that no matter how fast you may think you can draw that Peacemaker out of the holster Sundance, there's always somebody who can draw it faster out of his or hers.

One of the ways that we protect ourselves is integrity. We obey the rules. Remember that the *Ten Commandments* were not offered to the Hebrews and through history-- later-- to us to keep us from having a good time. When we take those commandments seriously and refuse to break them by living honest lives defined by personal integrity then a lot of people will not get hurt, starting with you and me; but not just you and me, for there are many examples of supposedly sophisticated worldly wise people who have stumbled and fallen because they failed to take the rules seriously, because they thought that sin is something other people do, because they believed that they were somehow exempt from the rules. Not only did they hurt themselves but they hurt those whom they professed to love. They hurt many who looked up to them and admired them and wanted to be like them.

So the commandments were transcribed long ago, all of the rules were reduced to ten simple things to remember and if we obeyed them, it was guaranteed that our lives would be easier than if we didn't. Fewer people would be hurt if we obeyed them than if we didn't. Of course for several years I have maintained that by simply obeying the first commandment ("You shall have no other gods before me.") then the rest take care of themselves. The nice part of the first commandment is that there's nothing in there about any gods we might want to worship *after* God whether it's the USA or Kentucky basketball; it's OK-- just make sure to remember who the real "Number 1" is.

In the fourteenth chapter of John, Jesus said, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. . ."

So it is that from early on in the development of the Christian faith it was clear that we were and are imperfect and that we cannot do this on our own; not only does the Bible bear witness to this but thousands of historical studies, novels, poems, narratives, in every language in the world living and dead, from that time until this.

So according to the Gospel of John we have the Spirit to keep us on the right path, but all of those books as well as the Bible bears witness to the fact that people are not going to pay attention to Holy Spirit, after all, we have been granted free will; we can choose to believe or not to believe. It's as though the Spirit is not enough. It's as though a more demanding physical presence is required in the form of each other; that is for people like us who can hold each other accountable, and help us to continue along the difficult path Jesus invites us to follow. Finally we also need our lesson for today that concludes with a brief series of four commandments, each one of these commandments is preceded by Jesus' question, "Do you love me?" the first three commands are preparation for the fourth one.

The risen Christ commanded Peter to take care of the flock to feed them and tend them, lamb and sheep.

Then came the final command which I do not believe is possible to follow without the preparation of spiritual feeding and tending, combined with the presence of the Spirit, and the presence of each other holding us accountable-- and that is to follow.

What does that mean? Follow where? To what end? For what purpose?

It is something I believe we will know when we come upon it. It will come upon us in different ways according to our individuality. I believe we will understand when we have received the required feeding and tending that we must do for each other according to the gifts God has given us. I believe we will be well prepared when the Spirit of God falls upon us to go where he tells us and to do what he wants for us to do.

In the meantime our task is to look out for each other, to care for each other, to prepare ourselves through the various spiritual exercises, and to await the Spirit.