

Sermon for April 28, 2019

“Do You Love Me?”

John 21:1-19

Staunton Church of the Brethren

Scott L. Duffey, Pastor

You might consider the whole sermon today to be a bit of a parable on discipleship.

James Rebanks is a shepherd in the Lake District of England, working the land where his father and grandfather tended sheep and where many others have done so for thousands of years. His book, *The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake District*, takes those of us who are uninitiated, into the rhythms of life on those green “fells,” or hills — rhythms that haven’t changed much for shepherds over the course of hundreds of generations. Despite all the advances in technology and progress that characterize the 21st-century world, shepherding is still an ancient and unchanging way of life that is always about the sheep and the land.

Most of us think of shepherding as an idyllic profession from a bygone age. We picture the green pastures and still waters of Psalm 23. We miss the fact that shepherding is also muddy, bloody, smelly and difficult work. It takes a practiced hand and an eye for detail that is honed over time. It’s not for the faint of heart or for those who just want to dabble in it. But for those who take it on and become what’s known as a “hefted” shepherd, the life can be rewarding and satisfying.

Rebanks describes some would-be shepherds who rent a farm to try their hand: he says, “The get-up and get-out voice in their heads isn’t strong enough, and they just don’t care enough about the sheep and the land to sustain their initial enthusiasm once the going inevitably gets tough. Things fall apart, and they soon leave. The voice in our heads is what holds the Lake District together, puts the walls back up, drains the fields and keeps the sheep well-tended and bred ... It is done because it should be done.”

Hearing about Rebanks' account of a shepherding life, it's easy to see some parallels to the kind of shepherding to which Jesus calls his disciples. It's a life that requires some apprenticeship, learning from others and from one's mistakes, but also one that requires a certain "get-up and get-out" voice in the disciple's head. Tending Jesus' flock is hard and difficult work, and Jesus pulls no punches about it. To do that work, the Good Shepherd is looking for a few good men and women for whom Peter, one of the original under-shepherds, can be a helpful example.

Jesus asks Peter the same question three times: "Do you love me?" (vv. 15-18). It's not hard to see the parallel here between Peter's earlier threefold denial of Jesus, which Jesus had predicted (13:38). These three questions act as a kind of restoration of Peter to his standing as a disciple, but also as a commission for a new kind of work that Jesus wanted him and the other disciples to do. Unlike the synoptic gospels (that's Matthew, Mark, and Luke), there is no indication here in John that Peter is the primary or lead disciple upon which the church will be built. The task Jesus gives him is one that will be given to all of his followers: to feed and tend Jesus' lambs.

Peter knew what it was to be a fisherman. When things got confusing for him after the resurrection of Jesus, he easily went back to what he knew (v. 3). But Jesus had already shown him that being an expert fisherman wasn't enough. The story of the miraculous catch of fish (which in itself is sign of the evangelistic task of the disciples) is only possible because Jesus is the one who directs these former fishermen in how to do their work (v. 6). They have learned how to "fish for people" by following Jesus, but what do you do with them once they've been caught? This is when Jesus will change the paradigm from fishing to shepherding: two ancient ways of making a living coming together to form a way of life for his disciples.

Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus revealed that he was the Good Shepherd (10:1-21). Now he is creating a team of under-shepherds to carry on the work for generations to come — shepherds who will tend and feed his flock. Notice that Jesus begins his exchange with Peter by calling him by name — a reminder that sheep always respond to the voice of their shepherd.

Likewise, Peter and the other disciples will be given a new commission to call Jesus' sheep by name and to feed and tend them with love. "I give you a new commandment," Jesus told them, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-35).

To feed Jesus' sheep means not merely to gather them together like a net full of fish, but to truly nurture and care for them. One is a momentary haul; the other is a lifetime commitment. In changing the metaphor and by expressing it three times, Jesus hammers home the point: Peter and the other disciples — will be in the shepherding business for the long haul; will experience sacrifice and self-denial; will often find it to be dirty and difficult work; and will need to get up and get out.

The same is true for all of us who follow Jesus today. While the word "pastor" implies that he or she is a shepherd, the truth is that the shepherding task is for all who follow Jesus. All of us have a particular flock that we tend, be it a family, a group of coworkers, or a circle of friends. Feeding them and tending them is a key commission for any Christian.

So, how do we feed those sheep? For that, we need a lesson from a real shepherd. In his book, Rebanks offers three rules of shepherding that focus on the attitude and commitment of the shepherd, not the quality of the sheep. Sounding a little like Jesus, Rebanks reinforces that shepherding is a commitment to a life of hard, dirty and sometimes dangerous work. Tending sheep isn't just a part-time occupation; it will require a full-time lifetime of sacrifice.

Rebanks' first rule of shepherding makes this clear right out of the gate: *It's not about you. It's about the sheep and the land.* A real shepherd knows that sheep must be fed, and the land cultivated to feed them, and that often means sacrificing one's own agenda to get up and go work the field no matter the weather or the date. In a shepherd's life, the sheep always come first. The gospels reveal that Peter and the other disciples often saw themselves as being the eventual beneficiaries of Jesus' fame and kingship. Jesus, however, constantly reminded them that it wasn't about them, but rather about the people they would be fishing for and then

shepherding. Jesus' command to "feed *my* lambs" indicates that the shepherding task is not about gathering one's own flock of admirers, but about modeling oneself after the Good Shepherd — the one for whom the sheep always come first.

If we're going to be shepherds, we have to be willing to see discipleship and ministry not as means to building our own spiritual and emotional capital, but as sacrificial work. Rebanks says that it's quite easy to tell the difference between a dedicated shepherd and a poser: he says "Everything and everyone is at times covered in [dung] and snot. You learn to accept that you will get spattered in [dung] at times, or slaver, or afterbirth, or snot. That you will smell of your animals. You can always tell how alien someone is to our world by how terrified of the muck they look." If you're going to be a shepherd-disciple, you've got to be willing to get down and dirty with the sheep, to take on their mess and have their aroma on you. Many people will come to faith in a mess. We can't be terrified of the muck. We must always remember that it's not about us and our sensibilities and preferences; it's always about the sheep!

This leads to Rebanks' second rule of shepherding: *Sometimes you can't win*. Working with sheep and working the land means that there are a lot of things that are out of your control — things like weather or a disease that hits the flock. Despite all your hard work, everything doesn't always go according to plan. We'd love it if being a disciple of Jesus and a good shepherd meant that we could expect everything to work out well all the time, but the truth is that we're never promised that. Sometimes the sheep in our care still go astray. Sometimes we ourselves are struck by disease, pain or failure. Sometimes we will lose by being out of step with the prevailing culture, or, in some cases, it might even mean losing our lives.

Jesus told Peter that feeding his lambs would result in the apostle being taken where he did not want to go and stretching out his hands to be nailed to a cross like his Lord (v. 18). Peter had told Jesus he was willing to die with him (13:37). Now Jesus was telling his impetuous disciple that he would get his wish, dying in the same way that Jesus did. But the reality for shepherd-disciples is that even in dying, we win. Peter's death would "glorify God" (v. 19). Jesus' own death was the means by which God defeated evil, sin and death in the ultimate

victory. In losing our lives, either spiritually in service to others or physically in dying for Christ, as many Christians in our world are doing today, we are actually winning. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” Jesus said to his disciples (15:13). A good shepherd always lays down his or her life for their sheep (10:11). The ultimate expression of loving one another as Christ has loved us is found in giving our lives away for others and letting God be glorified in the victory. I heard this week that Muslims in Sri Lanka are waiting on the Christian backlash after the awful bombings on Easter Sunday. I pray there is no backlash. What a lesson that can tell?

Peter’s road to being a shepherd would be a hard one. But what about the others? Looking around at the others Jesus had chosen to be shepherds, Peter spied “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and immediately wondered, “Lord, what about him?” (v. 21). It’s easy to give into the temptation to compare our brand of shepherding, our flock, our church and our work to someone else’s. Jesus, however, points Peter away from comparisons. “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!” (v. 22).

This exchange taps into Rebanks’ third rule of shepherding: *Shut up and go do the work*. There’s plenty of opportunity to complain and compare in the world of shepherding. It’s tempting to look over the fence at another’s flock and wonder about your own. It’s tempting to want to stay in bed instead of getting up to head out on a wet, freezing morning and check on the lambs, or to whine about how hard it all is. But real shepherds shut up and go do the work anyway. The work of loving others as Christ has loved us will always be difficult, and it will always be tempting to complain and compare. Jesus urges us not to focus on the hard stuff and not to waste our words on complaining, but to remember that our goal is always to glorify God.

English shepherds use the word “hefting,” which I mentioned earlier, to describe the way in which a flock of sheep has become accustomed and acclimated to a particular patch of land. Shepherds can also be “hefted” in this way, their lives and fortunes tied to a particular place and a particular flock that they love. In fact, most of us are. Jesus is looking for good

shepherds who will become “hefted” to a particular place and a particular people, giving their lives away in order to help others thrive for God’s glory. It might be the church, it might be our workplaces, or our schools, or our neighborhoods; but wherever it is, God has given us a flock of people to shepherd. It is work to be done, and we are called to do it.