

Sermon from Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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Dick Hanks' Ordination

John 21:15-19

The Most Important Meal of the Day

The conversation goes like this between a faithful church-goer and his somewhat skeptical friend:

“You don’t seem to miss a Sunday going to church.”

“I try not too.”

“And you’ve been going your whole life?”

“Yep, pretty much.”

“So you’ve probably heard hundreds of sermons through the years.”

”Yep, maybe even thousands!”

“So what’s the point? You can’t possibly remember all those sermons – especially the ones from long ago.”

”Well, true. But do you remember any of the meals that your parents gave you for your first 18 years or so? For that matter can you even remember what you had last week?”

“No, not really.”

“Well you might not remember the 6,000 plus actual meals your parents fed you but they sure gave you the nourishment and sustenance you needed to grow up.”

Jesus said, “Come and have breakfast,” and with that invitation, not only were bellies filled, but lives were turned upside down once again. For Peter, whose entire life was in that boat, whose livelihood depended on fish, being told to “feed my sheep” must have sounded about as logical as “go plant wheat.” “Lord, I’m a fisherman; that’s all I know how to do. You know I love you, but I don’t know anything about sheep.” “No, Peter, feed my sheep. You do know what I mean. Feed my sheep. Follow me.”

My guess is that, were it not his Lord Jesus talking to him, Peter would have sported the bumper sticker: "I'd rather be fishing!"

But there he was – the risen Jesus – making breakfast on the beach for them. It kind of gives new meaning to the wisdom that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, doesn't it?

Barbara Brown Taylor says, “This is the first meal of their new life together – a resurrection breakfast prepared by the only one who knows the recipe.”

I’ve always kind of hoped that Jesus took a walk down the beach with Peter after breakfast, away from the others, to have that little come-to-Jesus conversation. Peter’s been through enough. Goodness knows he’s embarrassed himself once already that morning, standing by the fire, dripping wet, while everybody else is enjoying breakfast in dry clothes. It would only make things worse if they all heard Jesus ask him not once, not twice, but three times, if he loved him.

Well, third time's the charm, as they say, and there's a lot of third time stuff going on here. It was the third appearance of Jesus to the disciples; and of course, we've all made the connection between Peter's denial of Jesus three times on the night of his arrest, and Jesus asking him if he loves him, three times, and telling him three times to "feed my sheep."

So the question is this: Do you love Jesus? Make no mistake – it's an "if/then" question. Jesus says, "If you love me, then feed my sheep." Do you love me? Before you answer yes, you need to know that it means all of God's sheep, not just the ones you get along with, or the ones who say "please" and "thank you."

It's not just the cute, clean, fluffy lambs on the hillside; it's the dirty, tough old ewe that won't budge. It's the one that you probably wouldn't miss if it wandered to the edge of a cliff and maybe even over it. And it's us, when we are painfully aware of our own failures, when we run from the truth, and deny that we know Jesus, when we're the cranky ones who don't want to admit that we might be wrong.

The good news is that we're on the other side of the resurrection – both in this story and in our present life. We have seen the authentic, sacrificial love of God given not only for those disciples but for us and for the world. The Jesus, who is asking about our love for him, is the one who has already loved us beyond measure.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection and the promise of the Holy Spirit, which will empower the apostles and subsequently the church, we are given the ability to love the way we are intended to love. Love is no longer restricted to our flawed attempts to love each other, but in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit loving others through us.

So this question "Do you love Jesus?" is really the question that should be asked of all candidates for ordination. Do we love and enjoy the Lord who was crucified and raised and who is the life and light of the world? And then only after we say, "Yes, Lord you know I love you" can we hear and heed the command, "Feed my sheep."

And for pastors who hear these words as we celebrate an ordination, feeding and tending His sheep will take the shape of discerning God's will for the gathered body of Christ whether in Groton, or West Boylston or Hamburg or wherever.

So what does this love look like? How do we feed the sheep? I am not sure I have an answer but perhaps we would do well to not merely look at the congregation as sheep, but as brothers and sisters in Christ – not seeing our brothers and sisters as somehow needing our help but as fellow travelers who need to hear the joyous wonderful gracious gospel story.

But really I wonder if a more important question than "How do we feed the sheep?" is "What are we feeding them? What's on the menu?" If what we are serving and being served is to be the most important meal – then it matters what we are serving.

John Stott was once asked what good preaching was. He answered that it was preaching that put some word of the Lord on the table every week.

We ought to preach the word that nourishes weekly; and preach it simply and directly.

A pastor friend of mine tells the story of being in his office working on his sermon for the coming Sunday. An older pastor stopped by his office and saw the table strewn with commentaries and books. As my friend stressed over his efforts to find the perfect illustration and the clever turn of a phrase, his older pastor friend simply said, "Chris, now that you've done all your studying, why don't you just read the passage tell them what it means?"

Preaching ought to serve up the words of God and the Word of God, not to wow people with great oratory. This means preach the Word not ourselves. Martin Luther said, "If any man would preach, let him suppress his own words."

Luther also summarized the work of a preacher by saying, "First, that he step up; secondly, that he speak up and say something (worthwhile); thirdly, that he know when to stop." To summarize Luther's statement: "Step up, speak up & shut up."

I have a square of paper taped to my computer at church – it has on it a great quote from an old sainted pastor in the Mass. Conference – Justin Hartman who died just over a year ago. He said this:

It is a tremendous privilege to be a Christian minister, and week after week I am awed that people will come to hear what I have to say, and then I remember that they are not coming to hear words of wisdom from me. They are coming hoping that they can find the treasure of the love of God, even if they must find it in an earthen vessel. And I remember and I thank God, that we do not have to preach ourselves, but Christ and him crucified. (Justin Hartman, 1954)

What we are serving is what has been given to us. I hope we're humble enough to know that even the best recipes in our recipe box won't provide the body of Christ with the true sustenance that it needs.

That which truly changes lives (which might then change the world) will come from outside of us.

Andor Foldes (Hungarian pianist, 1913 - 1992) experienced a moment that changed his life. At age sixteen (1929), living in Budapest, he was already a skilled pianist. But he was at his personal all-time low because of a conflict with his piano teacher. In the midst of that very troubled year, however, one of the most renowned pianists of the day came to the city to perform – Emil von Sauer who was not only famous because of his abilities at the piano, but could also claim the notoriety of being the last surviving pupil of Franz Liszt.

Von Sauer requested that young Foldes play for him, so he obliged the master with some of the most difficult works of Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann. When he finished, von Sauer walked over to him and kissed him on the forehead.

"My son," he said, "When I was your age I became a student of Liszt. He kissed me on the forehead after my first lesson, saying, 'Take good care of this kiss -- it comes from Beethoven, who gave it me after hearing me play.' I have waited for years to pass on this sacred heritage, but now it is yours." (Tim Kimmel, *Little House on the Freeway*, pp. 41-42)

Beethoven – Liszt – von Sauer – Foldes

Our lineage has a few more stops in it:

Jesus – Peter – followers of the Way in the Middle East –
the Christian Church before the Great Schism –
European Christians before and after the Reformation –
Bishops in the Church of England –
Pastor John Robinson and other pilgrim pastors –
the Congregational churches and the German Reformed churches in America –
United Church of Christ pastors.....

It's a rocky history – but it's our story. We've had our share of mistakes and denials along the way. But God continues to feed his sheep. And our text this afternoon reminds us that far more important than Peter's denials is the grace of Christ.

The risen Christ still calls, still feeds, still empowers doubters and even deniers for the ministry. Imagine that!

There is an old legend about the return of Jesus to heaven after his Ascension. It is said that the angel Gabriel met him at the gates of the heavenly city.

“Lord, this is a great salvation that you have accomplished,” said the angel. But the Lord Jesus, only said, “Yes.”

“What plans have you made for carrying on the work? How are all to know what you have done?” asked Gabriel.

“I left Peter and James and John and Martha and Mary to tell their friends, their friends to tell their friends, ‘til all the world should know.”

“But Lord Jesus,” said Gabriel, “suppose Peter is too busy with the fishing nets, or Martha with the housework, or the friends they tell are too occupied, and forget to tell their friends – what then?”

Jesus did not answer at once; then he said in his quiet, confident voice: “I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them.”

Jesus says, “Come and have breakfast. I know you're tired, I know you're hungry, and I know you're hungry for something more than fish and chips. Come and have breakfast. I'm the bread of life, and it's the most important meal of the day, you know. Come and have breakfast, and after breakfast we'll take a little walk and we'll talk about what I want you to do, we'll talk about taking care of my sheep. Follow me.”

Amen.