

The Shepherd of Christ's Sheep

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter 3, April 9, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30:4-12; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:(1-14) 15-19.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

This was the third appearance of Jesus to his disciples after His resurrection. It happened at Lake Tiberias. Lake Tiberias was where these disciples usually worked. They were professional fishers. So Jesus appeared to them while they were at work. Sometimes it's hard to envision Jesus at our place of work. We have a tendency to relegate Jesus to the religious and private sphere of our activities. But can you envision Jesus in a school class room as a teacher or as a student? Do you ever see Jesus at the gas station or in the grocery store? Did you ever bump into Jesus at the news shop or in the bank?

Maybe we have and not recognised Him. The disciples didn't recognise Jesus. ~~He was there but they didn't know it.~~ Could it be that we see Jesus far more often than we realise? George Docherty, Peter Marshall's successor at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., tells in his autobiography how one elder complained to Mrs. Docherty that he couldn't hear the Bible read at the mid-week prayer meeting in the Lincoln Chapel because of the noise of boisterous youngsters racing up and down stairs. She replied in her soft Scottish accent, "Ah, John, you should have joined them in their games. I believe I saw the boy Jesus chasing them along the corridors!" The Risen Lord is so often present and yet we don't recognise him.

Why do we fail to recognise the Lord? Is it because we expect him to be only in religious places and doing and saying religious things? But so often Jesus shows up in the ordinary events of life. Notice the question the Risen Lord asks the fishers, "Young men, haven't you caught anything?"

Not a religious question, but a question of deep concern to people who make their living catching fish. I believe the Lord still says things like that to us today. Somehow I believe that if Jesus were to speak to one of you young boys today he might say, "Do you think Mike Schmidt will hit another home run this afternoon?" Or to the business woman, "How were sales last week?" It's the voice of the Risen Christ who so often speaks to us through friends and strangers expressing concern for our health and welfare. The Bible speaks of our being in Christ and Christ being in us. The Risen Christ then *must* speak to us through the lips of others who challenge and encourage us and simply show interest in us.

The stranger on the shore directed the disciples to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. The best hours for fishing were over and yet these discouraged fisherman obeyed and cast their net once more and found their nets full. What is it that prompts us to try something again after many discouraging failures? We think, "I've tried that so many times before and nothing came of it." But something prompts us to try again and we meet with success. There's no better way of explaining it than to say that it's, "God's Spirit speaking with our spirit."

Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord." St John often referred to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" as though he were the only one whom Jesus loved. John was overwhelmed with the love of Jesus for him. Like so many of us John needed to remind himself that Jesus really did love him. He reminds me of my college roommate who fell in love with a girl named Marie whom he eventually married. For awhile he wasn't sure that she loved him. But one night he came back from a date saying, "She loves me. Can you believe it Atkinson, she loves me." St. John so often referred to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved"

because he was so overwhelmed by Christ's love for him.

Minutes after the full nets of fish were dragged to shore all the disciples were eating breakfast with Jesus. Then Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon... do you love me more than these others do?" Actually, the Greek text simply says, "Simon, do you love me more than these?" Maybe Jesus was referring to the nets and boat and fishing tackle. "Do you love me more than these?" What has first place in your life? Is it your home, your job, your family? The Lord asks, "Do you love me more than these?" The Lord knows that we live surrounded by an enticing world; that we're deeply concerned about our homes and family and health; all good things. And yet he asks us still, "Do you love me more than these?" And he asks us this today because he knows that it's only as we find the Lord as the Center of our lives and love, that all these other loves find their proper place.

But Jesus may have pointed, not to the boats and nets, but to the other disciples. "Peter, do you love me more than these other disciples?" Remember how Peter had once boasted, "If everybody else forsakes you, I won't." Peter was sure he loved Jesus more than anyone else. Others might deny Jesus, but not Peter. But he did! Not once, but three times! So maybe Jesus is asking Peter, "Do you still feel that you love me more than these disciples?" Sometimes we have a tendency to compare ourselves with others to our advantage and to their disadvantage. "I'm a better Christian than so and so." "That person certainly doesn't have as much love for Christ." Sometimes a church or a whole denomination looks at other churches and says, "Those so called Christians don't love Christ the way we do." So often that kind of boasting leads to a down-fall and we discover our love for Christ wasn't what we thought it was. You can't say

that you love more because you give more. You don't know what the person next to you gives. You can't say that you love more because you feel more. How do you know what the other person feels? You can't say that you love more because you're more orthodox. The Pharisees believed all the Bible and yet didn't love Jesus. You can't say that you love Jesus more than the person who's really made a mess of his or her life. Those who've been forgiven the most, love the most.

But what does Peter say in response to the question, "Do you love me?" He says, "Lord, you know everything. You know I've denied you, but I still love you." Can we say that? "Lord, you know everything... my denials, my doubts, my fears, my embarrassment, my desire to be liked and respected, my desire for success, you know it all. But you know that I still love you." The question Jesus asks us today is not, "Do you admire me?" nor "Are you busy in Christian causes?" nor "Do you find my philosophy attractive?" but "Do you love me?"

To love in this sense means that we're deeply grateful that Christ loves us and died for us. It means that Christ is the central point of reference in all the major decisions of our life. It means an increasing realization that the things he stands for matter more than anything else in the world. It means letting his Spirit more and more control the thoughts of our minds and the desires of our hearts.

And then Jesus says to Peter, "Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep." If we love Jesus we'll feed his sheep. We'll feed his sheep, not only in Oxford, but also in Asia, Africa and South America. Jesus has many hungry sheep and lambs throughout the world. They need to be fed. They need to be fed *literally*. In October we'll be having a CROP walk. Twenty-five percent of the money raised will help to feed the poor in Oxford. The rest will go

to buy food to feed Christ's sheep in such places as the Sudan and Ethiopia. Every Sunday when we bring our offerings for dedication to God some fraction of it goes to the feeding of the hungry. What we call our Mission section of the budget isn't an option for those who love Christ. Mission giving is a test of our love for Christ. "Do you love me?", says Christ, "then feed my sheep."

But we don't live by physical bread alone. Jesus is the Bread of Life and whoever comes to him will never hunger. Christ's flock needs also to be fed spiritually. Some of you need to consider feeding Christ's lambs in Sunday school this Fall or in Daily Vacation Bible School this Summer. Our Sunday school classes are getting bigger and bigger. We're going to need new teachers. And those who are teaching also need to be fed. But not only the young lambs need to be fed, the older sheep need to be fed also. It disturbs me that only a minority of the adult members of our congregation attend Sunday School. And yet the strength of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches has always been a Biblically literate laity. The Presbyterian Church has always placed high priority on feeding the sheep. We have a lot of sheep in our church that need to be fed.

Finally, Jesus wants us to know that if we truly love him and serve him we're going to pay a price. It involves sacrifice. Jesus said to Peter, "'When you are old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will tie you up and take you where you don't want to go.' In saying this, Jesus was indicating the way in which Peter would die and bring glory to God." Ancient church legend tells us that Peter was crucified in Rome because of his faith in Christ. He asked to be nailed to the cross head downwards, because he said that he wasn't worthy to die as His Lord had died. Love brought Peter a task, and love brought Peter a cross. Love always involves

responsibility, and love always involves sacrifice.

None of us knows what the future holds or what the world will look like in twenty, ten or even two years from now. But Jesus allows us to predict one thing. If we are truly faithful to the task to which the Risen Lord has called us we'll find ourselves, like Peter, being led, at times, where we don't necessarily want to go. It would be nice if the future held comfort, health, wealth and prestige to all of us. But because we love Christ we may be led to turn our backs on all those things to serve him, heart, soul and strength. May we all find strength from Christ's Spirit to follow wherever Christ leads.

Let us pray: Lord God, we believe that you have made us for yourself, and so our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. Renew in us the love that we have confessed, so that we may say with Peter to Jesus: "Lord, you know everything: you know that I love you."