

"FEED MY SHEEP"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Ernest Campbell recently and eloquently differentiated between believing in Christ and following Jesus. He put it this way:

"You can believe in Christ" he said, "without following Jesus, but you can't follow Jesus without believing in Christ..."

It's an intriguing observation and this morning for a few moments I want to continue his line of thought, which is why I had Alison read from the last chapter of John's Gospel that passage that ends,

"And when He (Jesus) had said this, He said to Peter, 'Follow Me.'"

This passage makes clear that before any of us can presume to follow Jesus, we first have to face Him and to answer honestly the question He put three times to Peter, "Simon, son of Jonas" (substitute your own name)...."Do you love Me?"

DEVELOPMENT

This question makes us realize that human beings are less what they've learned and more what they've learned to love. "Cogito, ergo sum" I think, therefore I am? No...not at all...or not entirely. "Amo, ergo sum". I love, therefore I am!

We eat, sleep, breathe and bleed - so we are part animal. And the life of the mind also plays an important part in our lives. But most fundamentally, we are as we love. Love is the name of our journey. Love it is that measures our stature: the more we love, the bigger we are. And there's no smaller package in all the world than that of a person all wrapped up in himself!

Yes - even though I have faith to move mountains, the knowledge to understand all mysteries, and though I give my body to be burned - the very stuff of heroism - but have not love, I am nothing! You couldn't make the point more powerfully and with greater clarity. And thank God St. Paul made it for us, for if, as Ernie Campbell pointed out, there is little following of Jesus, there is much loveless following. Many followers of Jesus have just enough religion to make themselves miserable. Who knows - maybe their following represents a kind of premature submission, perhaps a facade for some repressed rebellion. You know...made to go to

So we can see the importance of first facing Jesus and trying to answer that question that He put to Peter, "Simon, Son of Jonas, do you love me?" Really?

MORE THAN THESE

Actually, the full question put to Peter was, "Do you love Me more than these?" Now it's entirely possible that the question was accompanied by a sweep of the hand indicating Peter's boats, his skis, nets, his possessions...whatever they were. It's possible that Christ was even golf challenging Peter to give it all up for the preaching of the Gospel. clubs..

On the other hand, "more than these" could signify "more than these other disciples". In that case, Jesus would not be putting down the others, but perhaps reminding Peter of his own putdown of his fellow disciples. Remember how at the Last Supper, Peter insisted, "Lord, though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away". You can count on me!

"Simon, Son of Jonas, do you love Me?"

Isn't it comforting to recall that to whatever degree the Church is founded on Peter, it is founded on a second chance? So often the Church is derisively called "A crutch". So what makes you think we don't limp at times? The Church is made up of forgiven sinners, people who need two, three, four or more chances. Christ told Peter to forgive "seventy times seven". Luccock use to say to the seminarians at Yale, "Remember, the Church is not a museum for saints, but rather a hospital for sinners."

Three times Peter betrayed Christ - betrayed Him as surely as did Judas. But in contrast to Judas, Peter returned. The real tragedy of Judas is that he never did. Judas bears witness to the truth that guilt is the hardest idol to overthrow. (Bonhoeffer).

Three times Christ puts it to Peter, "Do you love Me?" as if each answer of Peter would wipe out each betrayal. And after each answer come the same instructions with only slight variation, "Feed My Sheep".

WHAT DO THESE INSTRUCTIONS MEAN

Now, what do these instructions mean? "Feed My sheep".

So often in life it seems that we have always to steer a course between an order that is rigid, repressive, restrictive and a freedom that is chaos and without any direction. The levelless followers of Christ quite naturally are "law and order" folk. They generally interpret "feed My sheep" to mean "Fill them up with religious scrupøes. Don't let them have their own way. Oppress their natural liberty". Horrified at that chilly extreme, others rush to its opposite. To them "feed My sheep" means letting them graze where they want to. Let them do their own thing." And in between on the misty flats, the rest - of us - drift to and fro...

To me "Feed my sheep" means that caring is the greatest thing...the only thing...that caring matters most. It recognizes how horrible is life where all is not well between people...where things are known but never spoken. It recognizes how horrible is life where reigns a love of the world - a pride, a selfish ambition, all that is earthly, nothing that is heavenly.

To me, "Feed My sheep" means - as regards children, lots of body warmth and steady, consistent discipline. As regards the rest of us, lots of heart to heart...warm embracing, as Jesus went face to face with Peter.

Does Christ forgive us our betrayals? So we should forgive in others what we can neither condone or excuse. Forgiveness sows a Godly seed, which is why Abraham Lincoln - whose birthday we celebrate this week - said, "With malice toward none and charity for all" - words that place him at the spiritual center of American history - if only all Americans would join him there!

And this too. Let us also remember that shepherds in the East don't drive their sheep. "He leadeth me beside the still waters...He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness". Example is still the best form of leadership, which suggest to me that being a life-loving presence, being something for others, is finally more important than doing something for them. Luther put it well when he said, "Doing good things doesn't make a person good, but a good person will do good things." "Feed My sheep". Be a life-loving presence. Love always finds a way. "The readiness is all" as Hamlet said, a true prescription for Christian living!

But if love finds a task, it also brings a cross. At least it did to Peter, as before him to Christ.

"Truly, truly I say to you...when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.

This He said to show by what death He was to glorify God. After this, He said, "Follow me."

Why is goodness forever on the scaffold, and wrong upon the throne? Because what human beings seem most to fear is not the evil in themselves, but the good - the good being so demanding. Never would we have crucified Christ - the best among us - had we not first crucified the best within us. But never mind. Don't follow the crowd. Follow Christ - cross and all. Keep your eyes on Him as He moves out there in front of you. Follow where He goes. Don't just believe in Christ. Follow Jesus. Say to yourself with Kris Kristofferson,

"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose".

And where there's nothing left to lose - there's so much more to give.

Or think of this: at the time of Jesus' trial, "in the chaos of accusation and timidity, garment rending and hand-washing, individual betrayal and mob mania, there is one point of self-control: who? Jesus. He's the only one who is acting freely.

Death is the common meeting place of all that lives. As the late Red Smith once wrote:

"Dying is no big deal, the least of us will manage that. Living is the trick".

And living for Jesus is the biggest thing any of us can ever do. Not just believing in Christ, but following Jesus. Being a life-loving presence. Let us not fear to follow Him even though being open to love means being open to suffering. After all, we are made for love - not greed. For giving. Not always taking. We are as we love. Amo, ergo sum!

CLOSING STORY

Let me conclude with a story that I came across recently that reinforces this Christian view, all the more so because it comes from another tradition.

An old man in India sat down in the shade of an ancient banyan tree whose many roots stretched far away into a swamp. Presently he discerned a small commotion where the roots entered the water. Concentrating his attention, he saw that a scorpion had become helplessly entangled in the roots. Pulling himself to his feet, he made his way carefully along the tops of the roots until he came to the place where the scorpion was trapped.

He reached down to extricate it, but each time he touched the scorpion, it would lash his hand with its tail, stinging him painfully. Finally his hand was so swollen he could no longer close his fingers, so he withdrew to the shade of the tree to wait for the swelling to go down. As he arrived at the trunk, he

saw a young man standing above him on the road laughing at him. "You're a fool" said the young man, "wasting your time trying to help a scorpion that can only do you harm." The old man thought for a moment and then spoke this word in reply:

"Simply because it is in the nature of the scorpion to sting should I give up my nature, which is to save?"

PRAYER O Lord Jesus Christ, help us to see that in following Thee we serve and find ourselves, for we are made and meant to be vulnerable, to be open to the "stings" of life...hurt, pain and suffering - all in the service of love.

Help us to grow more and more in our love for Thee...that we may care more and more for the needs of others. And grant that we may fear Thee and have no other fear, and so be born not only of sin, but no less of heavenly grace.

Free us to find ourselves in our service to Thee. And when we hear our name called by You to answer that searching question, "Lovest Thou Me?" - may our answer be, "Yea"... "Lord, we do"...then let us feed your sheep and follow in Your steps even when those steps take us through pain, suffering and sacrifice.

We ask this in the name of Him whose nature was to save and to serve, to love and forgive, even Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Speaking of her divorced mate, she said to me, "It was a great relationship while it lasted....I loved him. And he loved him."