

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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“Where You Do Not Wish to Go”?

John 21:1, 4-5, 9-18 ...Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias.... 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.... 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."

Don't you know that that was a long, awkward breakfast there on the beach when the Risen Christ hosted Peter and the other disciples with grilled fish and bread? The story says that they knew this it was Jesus but they didn't want to say anything. I imagine not. And I'll bet their breakfast conversation was both strained and shallow: *"Could you pass the fish?" "Great fish." "The bread is done just right." "How about those Broncos?"* Strained pleasantries in the presence of the One whom they had abandoned at the end. But now He's back. And the breakfast is over, and Jesus isn't going to let Peter off the hook. He clears his throat, and looks at Peter, and Peter

thinks, “*uh-oh, here we go.*” But Jesus simply says, Peter, “*Do you love me more than these?*” Now the word “these” here in the Greek is vague. It could mean “*more than these guys.*” It could mean “*more than food we’ve just had.*” But the most reasonable translation is probably: “*Do you love me more than everything else.*” And Peter responds, twice, “*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*” But here’s interesting thing that our English translation obscures: There is more than one word for “love” in the Greek, and the first two times Jesus asks Peter the question, Jesus uses the word *agapas* – which means self-sacrificing, selfless love. Peter, “*Do you agapas me more than anything else?*” But Peter responds with a different form of the word, *philo*. Now *philo* means “brotherly love and affection.” It’s the kind of usage that a football player might say at the end of a close-fought game: “*I sure do philo you guys.*” But Jesus notices the word Peter has used, because the third time he asks Peter, he turns that word back on him: Peter, “*do you philo Me more than all else?*” Now this is a crucial point in the story. Jesus’ use of Peter’s word could have been understandably sarcastic: “*You philo me as long as your skin is safe, eh Peter? Otherwise, you deny me and run away.*” We might have made that kind of sarcastic response, but not Jesus. No, in Jesus’ mouth this question is a moment of redemption.

For instead of seeing Peter’s use of *philo* as a way of distancing himself from Jesus, Jesus looks deep into Peter’s heart and understands that Peter probably doesn’t feel worthy of claiming *agapas* – selfless love – for Jesus; after all, he failed Jesus more than once and he has sense enough and shame enough to know that any claim to *agapas* that he might make would sound rather shallow and rather hypocritical, no? For his actions on the last day of Jesus’ life spoke much louder than his words. The story

here even subtly reminds us of Peter's failures to love and stand up for Jesus with such a seemingly humdrum touch as the grill. The word for the fire on which Jesus cooks their breakfast is only used one other time – and that was when Peter was standing beside the fire, after Jesus was arrested, and told his inquisitor "*Jesus? No never heard of him; don't know him,*" not once, but three times. No doubt, Peter is now remembering his failure and his fecklessness as Jesus insistently questions him. And so he waits now for Jesus to drop the other shoe: Something like, "*Begone from me. I'm going to find somebody more reliable to lead my church.*" But instead Jesus does something utterly remarkable. Instead, of castigating Peter for his failure of nerve, his failure of self-transcending love, for what he was unable to be, Jesus, instead of excoriating Peter, gives him a commission in three slightly different ways: Did you notice? "*Feed my lambs,*" "*tend my sheep,*" "*feed my sheep.*"

Peter is often called the first pastor, the first bishop of the church. And because of that, these three commands are also often cited to ministers at their ordinations. But they are for more than just ministers; Jesus' words are in fact for each of us. Now, each of these commands is subtly different but it is that first one -- "*Feed my lambs*" – that I want to say more about. Lambs are the most vulnerable of the flock. When Barbara and I lived in California, coyotes and even mountain lions would occasionally take lambs; in Hawaii, it was the nasty and scary feral hogs that had a taste for mutton. Lambs are vulnerable. And Jesus is telling Peter – and us – that part of the work of being the church, of being a Christian, in this world is to give special attention to the most vulnerable among us. I don't know what that meant for Peter. But I invite you this morning to ask yourself what Jesus' commission might mean for **you**: For you, it might

mean giving extra time or attention or money to help those organizations and ministries that seek to aid at-risk children or the elderly, or working for laws and practices that would help reduce the number of children who go to bed hungry in this country or around the world. It might mean volunteering for a role during IHN week. It might mean calling on your legislators to do more to protect the most vulnerable among us. It might mean making sure that every grocery list you take into King Soopers has on it items for ESM's food pantry. It might mean refusing to laugh – or even confronting someone – when a racist slur is used or a homophobic joke is told or an ugly ethnic characterization is made. *Feed my lambs. Feed my lambs.*

The closing line of today's story is this, which Peter addresses to Peter: "... *and [they] will take you where you do not wish to go.*" We know those kind of days, don't we? – when where we thought we were going ended up being far different from where we ended up, and sometimes those surprises are not pleasant. And Peter also found himself totally surprised by where this new day, with the sun barely up, had taken him. After all, the very fact that he'd gone back to fishing, that he hadn't believed the women who'd told him about Jesus' resurrection, that instead of gathering the other disciples and Jesus' followers around him to continue to live out what Jesus had taught – all of these things suggest that he'd made his peace with his failure of nerve and he must have wanted to just fade away. But life was going to take him elsewhere, for Jesus had other ideas, other intentions. *Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.* And the story closes with a simple word from Jesus, another command: "*Follow me.*" Life indeed sometimes takes us where we weren't expecting. That can be gloriously so, or

tragically so. But there are three things, in the end, that we can learn from this story: First, God never stops trying to transform us and lead us beyond our sin, our failures. Jesus didn't give up on Peter, and God doesn't give up on any of us. Second, Jesus feeds us. We know that, but sometimes we are tempted to take our nourishment elsewhere – or what we think is nourishment. Sometimes we are oh-so-tempted by the junk food of hate radio and the blandishments of those who would tell us that this or that person or group or religion is bad or even evil. Sometimes we would prefer to feed on false manna of stereotypes that drive wedges between God's people. But Jesus feeds us and the whole world with grilled fish of unconditional love. Why were there exactly 153 fish caught by Peter and the disciples? Well, in ancient times it was said that there were exactly 153 species of fish in the Sea of Galilee – with that, the symbolism becomes obvious: the nets of God's love are intended to encompass every single thing, creature, and person that God has made. That is the real nourishment with which Jesus feeds us. Third, notice something: every single post-resurrection appearance of Jesus that is recorded in the gospels ends with Jesus commissioning somebody to do something. With the women at the tomb, it was "Go and tell." With Peter, it is "follow me." Jesus feeds us not just that we might be fed, but so that we will be in a position to accept that commission, able to follow Him.

Do we know exactly where that will lead? No. Like Peter, God may take us someplace we didn't expect. God may ask of us something that we never thought we could do. God may turn our lives in directions that we didn't even realize were there. God may have in mind all kinds of sheep that we didn't know needed feeding and who are now our responsibility. God may want us in places that surprise us. But through it

all God will feed, God will use the best that is within us, God will help us tend the sheep
He puts in our path. For that good news, for that opportunity, let us say, thanks be to
God!