

A New Shepherd

John 21: 15-17

K Karpen, Sunday, May 14th , 2006

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Last week, we looked together at the story of the risen Christ appearing to some of the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This was an appearance that sends Peter, in particular, "over the top".

Jesus calls them to shore and invites them to share a breakfast he's made for them: some fish and some bread cooked over a charcoal fire at the edge of the lake. Today the story continues, but it narrows its focus.

Now, our focus is just on Jesus and Simon Peter, as Jesus calls Peter aside for a little chat; a final pep talk. Jesus has a question for Peter and Jesus has a job for Peter.

First, the question; it is a short, simple question: Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? And it gets a short, simple answer: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." It's a good answer. It is an obvious answer. It is the correct answer.

Just for the record, if anybody comes up to you, be they your mother, your grandfather, your daughter, your friend, your spouse, your significant other, your dog or anyone at all; if anyone comes up to you and asks you, "Do you love me," ninety –nine percent of the time the answer they are looking for is "yes". The true answer might be something else. The true answer might be a little more complicated. The true answer might be something like: yes, but..... or yes, but you make it very difficult. The true answer might be: I'm not really sure or I'm exploring my feelings or it's a little complex. The true answer might be "How can I after what you did to me and what I've done to you." One of these might be the true answer, but listen up. There is a difference between the true answer and the correct answer. Peter gives the correct answer. Jesus seems to sense that maybe just maybe it's not the true answer.

Why shouldn't it be the true answer? This is the Peter, the rock, the one who goes over the top for Jesus. This is Peter, whose buffoonish enthusiasm for Jesus sends him over the top. Of course he loves Jesus! That is the correct answer and he gives it. He gives it firmly and with conviction. He gives it without ambiguity or a shadow of doubt. Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

But Jesus has a shadow of doubt. Why? He has a shadow of doubt because Peter doesn't act like he loves Jesus. How do you act like you love Jesus? You do the things Jesus did. You do the things Jesus says to do.

Friends, just between you and me, I know a lot of people who are over the top in their love for Jesus; who love nobody but Jesus. These people would do anything for Jesus.

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They would go anywhere for Jesus, but they wouldn't cross the street for anyone else. Maybe that's how Peter is striking Jesus right now. Maybe this is because Jesus showed him what to do. Jesus told him what to do and it didn't involve returning to his promising career in the fishing industry. In fact, what Jesus told him involved a whole new career, a whole new job, and a whole new, all consuming life. Peter, however, isn't doing it.

So, Jesus asks again: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He gets the correct answer, but he asks again. When Jesus asks a third time, Peter gets a little bit upset and says, "he felt hurt, he felt grieved, literally grief as though something or somebody died and he says: "Lord, You know everything. You know that I love you."

But, does Jesus know that? Sure Peter goes over the top; jumping off the boat and swimming to the shore to see him. But this is the guy who a few weeks back when the going got tough said he didn't know Jesus. He said he never saw Jesus. He said he wasn't with Jesus. You can't blame Jesus if after being denied 3 times he wants to ask the question three times. Especially since the answer to the question really isn't "Yes, Lord."

Jesus makes it clear that he has plenty of people who say, "Yes, Lord." He got more than enough people saying "Yes, Lord" to him; then and now. The answer to that question isn't yes. The answer to that isn't any word. It isn't any word at all. The answer to that question is a new job, a new career, a whole new life for Peter and for us.

Here's the job Jesus is posting: Shepherd. Here's the job description: feed my sheep. It's short! But, Jesus isn't sure we will get it so he repeats it 3 times in slightly different ways: Feed my sheep, Tend my sheep, Take care of my lambs.

Jesus can't do it anymore. He needs a new shepherd. Now shepherd you may remember was not a great job. In the days of Jesus shepherds were despised. They were thought of as shifty and dirty—but how would you be if you stayed days and nights in a field with a lot of sheep.

Still, God is described as a shepherd in the section of Ezekiel 34 that we read today. Jesus takes on the role of the good shepherd. But he can't do it anymore. Now, he's passing it on to Peter. And onto us.

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Friends, Jesus has a career for you. I don't mean you need to quit your day job, although some of you may find that you need to do that down the road. I am not talking about ministry in any narrow sense. I'm talking about ministry you do wherever you are. I'm talking about shepherding. I am talking about sheep freedom. I'm talking about feeding the sheep of your family; even the ones you may call the black sheep, the odd sheep. I'm talking about feeding the sheep of your office. Some of those offices are full of sheep! I'm talking about feeding the sheep at school, on the street, on the sidewalk, at church. All kinds of sheep. The ones you like. The ones you think are good. The ones you don't like. God is not fussy. Jesus is not fussy. Jesus loves us all. Jesus wants you to feed us all. And what do we eat? What do all us sheep eat? It is really simple. We eat love.