

“Feed My Sheep”

John 21:15-19

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Blessing of the Animals/Rummage Set-Up Sunday

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When they 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.’ 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.’ 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.

[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.’ (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.)]

After this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’

Over the course of this year we've been tracking some 40 stories from the Bible. It's hard to believe that we're almost at the end! But in just a few weeks, we'll wrap it up on Pentecost Sunday!

What have we learned? One thing that's struck me is how consistent so many of the messages of Scripture have been. I guess it shouldn't surprise me, right? But from beginning to end, there are some core messages God tells us. Things like,

- “You're my beloved child.”
- And, “I forgive you when you mess up ... which you will!”
- And “Don't try to do this life alone. I've given you a family of faith.”
- And, “Make a covenant – a promise – with me and with one another, just as I have made my sacred promise that I will never let you go.”

But I also know that in the Bible, as in our relationships today, first words and last words often have the most clout. Think about it: a job applicant has one chance to make a first impression; a professor wants to make a point while students are giving their full attention. First words

matter. So do last words. What does a parent say when they kiss their child good-bye for the day? “I love you.” And what is a “last will and testament” but the desire to make our final wishes permanent. First words and last words? They have impact.

So today as we heard Jesus’ last words on earth – his instructions to Peter – it made me wonder: what were *God’s* first words to Adam and Eve?

This is what Genesis 1 tells us: the day God created people in God’s very own image, God blessed them, and said: “Be fruitful, fill the earth, and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28) Are you made in my image? Then do what I would do: take charge of every living thing on earth. Are you like me? Then take care of them.

Which is strikingly similar to Jesus’ last words to Simon Peter: “Simon, do you love me? Then feed my sheep.”

Beginning and ending, it's all about our divine calling – God's charge to us to tend the earth and all its creeping, crawling, flying creatures ...and Jesus' charge to us to tend the sheep of his pasture, the lambs of his fold.

God loves us so that we can love others;

God feeds us so that we can feed the sheep of that pasture;

God tends us so that we can tend the earth.

In other words, like Abraham whom God first called into covenant, we are blessed to be a blessing. That is a sacred privilege. To be made in the image of God, and called to be God's presence in the world. We get to be Christ's hands and feet, the living, loving presence of God in the world. Which is extraordinary, if you think about it. It is the most exciting purpose for our lives, the coolest thing ever. Way better than making lots of money, being the most popular, having our name up in lights.

Which is one of the reasons I love this weekend so much. Just think about it: Friday was Earth Day. Today is Blessing of the Animals. At this service we will ordain and install more officers – elders and deacons who

are shepherds of our church. From 1-5 pm? It's Rummage Set-Up, when we roll up our sleeves to help prepare for the biggest mission fundraiser ever, which also serves to reuse and recycle thousands of tons of stuff that would otherwise go to landfill. Then at 5 pm we worship again, breaking bread at Christ's table, sharing fellowship at dinner. What do these things have in common?

They all invite us to celebrate the earth God made and called so very good ... they all encourage us to savor the blessing of myriad creatures we think of as family ... they all urge us to look up from our electronic devices long enough to look another human being in the eye and see God's image ... they all pull us out of our own worries and ambitions, our own fears and delights. They invite us to look up and see ourselves in the midst of this gorgeous, glorious world that God so loves ... that God loves enough to send his only Son, so that none of us might perish, but have eternal life.

Can you think of a more important invitation? With all the stuff we do in life – all the classes we take, all the work we do, all the dishes we wash, and the laundry we fold. Of all of the things that we do that we know need to get done and we count as important. There is nothing more precious than this - to be blessed to be a blessing, to be invited to care. To care for this world and its swamps and its mountains, its deserts, its oceans. To care for the neighbor who is across the world in Egypt or Syria, to care for the neighbor next door. To care for the sheep that might have gotten lost along the way. To be God's heart, you, each of you, each of us, invited to be God's heart. Amazing. I hope, I pray that this day each one of us will say, "Yes." Amen.