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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2016
 Texts: Ezekiel 34:1-6, John 21:9-17

Feed My Sheep

Introduction to New Testament Scripture

Our second reading comes from the last chapter of John. It tells the story of Peter and six other disciples spending a whole night fishing and having no luck. Just after daybreak, a man calls from the shore and tells them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. They do so and get a huge catch. The beloved disciple recognizes the man as none other than the resurrected Jesus, whereupon Peter threw on some clothes, jumped in, and swam ashore. Listen now for God's word as we pick up the story. *John 21:9-17*

Sermon

We Presbyterians like to eat a lot. We eat at Wednesday night suppers, Atrium fellowship time, church picnics, Easter brunches, Sunday school class parties, choir get-togethers, the list goes on. Meet and eat. We can hardly do one without the other. I happen to think it's a very biblical practice. There's a lot of meeting and eating in the Bible.

And so here in our text for the morning we find an outdoor breakfast cookout. And who is hosting it but the risen Jesus? He's got a little charcoal fire going on the beach where he's grilling some fish. He's got some bread, too. "Come and have breakfast," he says to the disciples. Peter, dripping wet from his impulsive dive into the water (he couldn't wait and had to swim ashore); the others, tired and hungry, exhausted from staying up all night and just now hauling in nets nearly breaking from the huge catch: they all pull up a rock and sit down to eat.

That image of Jesus as the host is a familiar one to gospel readers. Did you know that other than the resurrection, the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels is the Feeding of the Five Thousand? There Jesus is, by the same Sea. He's on a mountain by the sea. Mountain is an exaggeration, it's more like a big hill. The crowds are there. They are tired and hungry. And there's no convenience store down the road. "We can't feed this multitude," the disciples moaned. "Six months' wages couldn't begin to be enough to give everybody a package of Nabs." Andrew pointed to a little kid with five barley loaves and two fish. "But what are they among so many people?"

Then Jesus, *the host*, took the loaves, said a blessing, and gave them to the people. Same with the fish. And no one left hungry. There was enough—more than enough.

Wherever Jesus is, there's plenty. Plenty of fish—153 large fish on that morning by the sea, we are told. Plenty of bread—twelve Tupperware baskets of leftovers on the hillside with the five thousand people. Plenty of wine--back in Cana at the wedding at the beginning of the Gospel of John. And it was good wine—not the cheap stuff--six huge cisterns of water turned to wine. Good and plenty. Jesus is the host with the most. It's a familiar image, that of the Lord at the table feeding us: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. My cup

runneth over.”

This isn't a Communion Sunday but we can't miss the overtones of the Lord's Supper in our text. We can't miss the echoes of the Eucharist where the officiant says something like, "This is the Lord's Table. All those who trust in him are invited to the feast which He has prepared."

I actually heard those words, or ones like them, at the very spot where Jesus is thought to have served his disciples the breakfast of grilled fish and bread. I was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They took us to the spot. It wasn't how I imagined it. The Sea of Galilee isn't what comes to mind when you think of a sea. It's really just a lake, albeit a big inland lake, roughly the size of Lake Lanier. You can see across it. The beach wasn't sandy, but covered with tiny, gray pebbles. I spotted a school of fish feeding in the shallow water, but to my surprise, they were catfish.

There's a little Franciscan chapel very close to the water's edge. This building only dates from the 1930s, but as early as the fourth century there's been a church there, a church on the spot where tradition says it happened. Inside the chapel, in front of the altar, there's a rock sticking out of the floor, a natural outcropping of limestone that has been left. It was on that stone that Jesus is said to have served grilled fish and bread to Peter and the other disciples. And it was there beside that stone in that chapel that I ate the Lord's Supper with fellow pilgrims.

The Lord fed the disciples on the lakeshore. And the Lord feeds us. We are fed at the Communion Table, to be sure. But we are fed in so many other ways. I went recently to the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC on Anna's spring break and fed on the Renoirs and Rembrandts. I listened to the Athens Symphony Orchestra just last night and fed on Gershwin and Copeland. Have you been feasting this spring on the beauty of daffodils and dogwoods, of azaleas and irises? Maybe an evening with a good book or especially time spent with the Good Book is one thing that nourishes you. Or friendships and kinships. Or Sabbath times of rest. Or sharing a meal. The Lord feeds us continually with good food and plenty of it—food for both our body and soul. We are well fed.

When they had finished breakfast, John says, Jesus gave the pitch. Well, that's not exactly what John says. But you know what I mean. You go to one of those lovely meals. White table cloths in the banquet hall. A nice chicken dinner. Key lime pie for dessert. You are well fed, feeling full and satisfied. And then, after the meal, the host gets up and gives the pitch, i.e. the request for action. Get out your checkbook, sign the petition, volunteer to help. Or as Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." Only the pitch here doesn't involve guilt and manipulation. No teary stories of abandoned orphans. Nor does it turn on duty: "It's only right to do your part."

Rather the pitch goes like this.

Jesus says to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"

Peter said, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."

Then again, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

"Yes; Lord; you know that I love you."

"Tend my sheep."

And for the third time, "Do you love me?"

Now Peter's feeling a little hurt.

"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

"Feed my sheep."

The pitch isn't based on guilt or on duty. Did you notice Jesus' operative word? Love.

Jesus' request of Peter to feed his sheep is based on love.

I don't mean squishy love—warm puppies and pink butterflies. I mean the kind of love that is tough. That is costly. That gets bruises and lumps and even blood on it. Love that is giving and forgiving.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asked Peter as they sat beside that lakeside charcoal fire—the embers burning and the distinctive smell wafting through the air. Surely Peter recalled another charcoal fire not that long before. That was the fire in the courtyard at the high priest's residence. The slaves and police had built a little charcoal fire that night, the night that would be Jesus' last. They had built a little fire because it was cold. They were standing around it warming themselves when Peter joined them. He and another disciple had followed Jesus there after he was arrested in the garden. It was by that charcoal fire as he was fanning out his fingers toward the heat when the woman who was guarding the gate said to him, “You're not also one of this man's disciples, are you?”

“I am not,” he had blurted.

Others echoed her question. A second time he said, “I am not.”

Then one of the slaves of the high priest, asked, “Did I not see you in the garden with him?” And for a third time, Peter denied. Three times by that nighttime charcoal fire Peter disavowed any connection with Jesus.

However, it's pretty obvious that Peter's betrayal couldn't cancel Jesus' love for him, because there they were-- Jesus once again providing for Peter and the others: a miraculous catch of fish, a cooked breakfast shared among friends, and now a commission entrusted to Peter—even though he had failed Jesus miserably--a commission to carry on his work.

Three times by the nighttime charcoal fire Peter had said no.

But three times by the morning charcoal fire Peter got to say yes. It was as though Jesus took a green pen and lovingly underlined three times: forgiven, redeemed, do-over. Jesus' relationship with Peter was rooted in love--forgiving love, sacrificial love, giving love. And that's true for us all, because, of course, Peter is our stand-in.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks us.

“Then, feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Care for those I care for, especially the weak, the vulnerable, the injured. Stand up for them. Protect them. Seek and serve them. Give them the help they need.”

Love, you see is something that flows. Jesus loves and feeds us. So we love and feed others. That's how it works.

Of course some folks just want to be fed.

The Sea of Galilee is a vibrant, fresh water lake. It's full of life and teeming with fish to this day. It is fed by the Jordan River from the North. But the Jordan River flows through the Sea of Galilee and exits on the southern end. It flows all the way to the Dead Sea. That body of water is just like its name says: dead. Nothing at all lives in it. The Sea of Galilee is fed and in turn feeds. It's alive. It's vital. The Dead Sea, on the other hand, is fed and, in turn, feeds nothing. Water flows in it, but not out it. And it is dead.

The life to which Jesus calls us is a life that both receives and gives. It's a life of being fed ourselves and turning around and feeding others. As God told Abraham and Sarah when this whole business started, “You are blessed in order to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.”

Now you might have excuses for why we can't possibly manage Jesus' request to feed his sheep. But don't even bother because they just won't hold up.

If you say you aren't qualified for the job, just look at Peter. Peter flunked discipleship royally! He bailed out. He abandoned Jesus, leaving him in the lurch. So if Jesus can use someone like Peter, whose faith was about as wavering as it gets, you don't have a leg to stand on.

And, if you say that you don't have the resources to do the job—not enough time, not enough money, not enough experience, forget it. There are 153 fish, twelve containers of leftovers, and six vats of premium wine all lined up to testify that that your excuse won't do. Jesus will give you the wherewithal to feed his sheep. He'll give you all you need and more. And that goes for us not just individually but corporately as a church.

So it really boils down to love. Do you love him? Do you love the one who cares for you, who feeds you with all sorts of good and plenty, who forgives you, who believes in you, who even died for you?

If so, there's only one thing to do: feed his sheep.