

"TENDING SHEEP IN DANGEROUS TIMES"

John 21: 1-19; Acts 9:1-20

April 22, 2007

The Rev. Ryan Lambert

"I'm going fishing." I wonder how many times that statement had welled up inside of Peter during the course of his time as a disciple of Jesus? When the Pharisees were haranguing Jesus, was Peter dreaming of his former life as a fisherman? When Jesus began to foretell his death, was Peter thinking of those times when he had hauled in a great catch? When Jesus violated his personal space by washing his feet, did Peter block it all out by remembering a great day of fishing? In our gospel passage it feels like he has finally had enough, and he is returning to what he knows best: the fishing boat, the nets, the sails, and the camaraderie with his friends. I wonder if Peter, for the first time since that cock crowed, has found himself comfortable again, able to leave it all behind.

Peter's announcement that he is going fishing makes me think of small-town America, a place where you might go to the local market, only to find a "Gone Fishing" sign plastered on the door. Personally, I find it interesting that fishing is so often tied to relaxation. Although it would be inaccurate to call me a fisherman, my childhood and youth was sprinkled with fishing excursions with my dad, grandfather, and uncles, and relaxation never seemed to be a part of those days. My experiences with fishing include the anticipation of a first fishing trip with my dad, only to then discover that our day would be spent fighting to keep our boat from blowing into others when our anchor wasn't heavy enough to hold us against the blustery winds. I also remember a cold early morning fishing trip with my brother, dad, uncles, and cousins that began with a long drive at some obscene hour in the morning, included a half-mile hike into the river, and concluded with eight frustrated people trying to cast lines as ice formed on them during an early spring cold snap in Eastern Washington. "Gone fishing" in my experience has often meant "going crazy," but for Peter it seems his fishing experience is an attempt to return to his roots and put his disciple days behind him. He had seen what happened to Jesus, and the nets and sails were calling him back.

But our gospel reading tells us that Peter wasn't allowed to slink away from his days as a disciple, because in this third resurrection appearance, when a stranger advises these disciples turned fishermen, Peter recognizes that it is Jesus who changes their fortunes and rather than luxuriating in the relative comforts of a boat, Peter jumps out of the boat and runs toward Jesus, returning with great enthusiasm to the one he had once denied. Peter is overcome by the appearance and announces that they are in the presence of the Lord. The text notes that although Peter was the first to recognize Jesus, all of the disciples understood that it was Jesus who was present with them; and, thus, this resurrection appearance becomes a resurrection moment for each of them, especially for Peter. In a moment that mirrors the miracle of the loaves and fishes, they share a breakfast feast where the disciples are renewed and brought back into the fold.

There is much debate about where this passage comes from because it has a tacked-on feel to it as the 20th chapter of John ends with a benediction of sorts, and it seems that this whole chapter is concerned with the rehabilitation of Peter. All of this is true; and while this chapter may not be in the voice of the

one we call “John,” there is likewise no proof that this book ever existed without this chapter. And so we should set aside the authenticity debate and, instead, look at what this resurrection appearance offered to Peter and the other disciples who were there, and more importantly what it offers to us.

There is interesting symmetry in this passage surrounding Peter because rather than being the one who denies Christ, in this passage he becomes the one who recognizes him and then in his conversation with Jesus Peter has the opportunity to answer for each and every one of those three denials as Jesus asks him “Do you love me?” not once, not twice, but three times. In answering these questions in the affirmative each time, it seems that this shifts from being a passage about the resurrection of Jesus to a story of the resurrection of Peter. This passage is necessary because we know Peter is supposed to be the rock upon which the church is to be founded, but if the last thing we see from Peter is his denial of Jesus, then Peter and the church itself never have a chance.

Instead, Peter becomes a vital piece of the church that forms in the aftermath of Jesus’ earthly life. Peter seems to understand what Jesus is calling him to do as he calls him to feed and tend his sheep. Love isn’t enough; Peter must act upon his profession of love and become the foundation of the church: a reality that Jesus makes clear will take Peter into “places that he does not want to go.” This is a resurrection moment for Peter, but it is also the moment when the difficulty of his call is set upon his shoulders as Jesus makes it clear that Peter is not signing onto a glorious job, but instead the task of tending a flock in and through difficult and dangerous times.

Although I don’t want to delve much into the conversion passage of Saul that we heard from Acts, I do think it is interesting that in the week we read of the reclamation of Peter and witness his willingness to become one of the heads of the church, we also read of one of the great persecutors being converted. The picture we are given of Saul—filled with vitriol and anger, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples”— this is exactly what Peter’s professions of love will force him to answer to. And yet Peter, no longer the one who denies Jesus or his own call, willingly accepts this dangerous work—even when it places him in the line of fire from those who, like Saul, will persecute, threaten, and even kill those who profess to follow Christ. In answering “yes” for love, in agreeing to tend the flock, Peter is committing to living in dangerous times.

This week it seems that we have all witnessed again the reality of contemporary danger which, unfortunately, and for different reasons, is not all that different from the danger that Peter was signing onto in John’s gospel. As our culture continues to wrestle with the horror of what happened on the campus of Virginia Tech this week, I could not help but return over and over to Christ repeatedly asking Peter, “Do you love me?” and then instructing him to tend the flock. I know what that meant for Peter, but what does that mean for us in the midst of our contemporary dangers?

Pardon me please if I step on toes as I attempt to answer this question, but several things come to mind.

First, and foremost, we cannot be consumed by this violence or by any violence for that matter. It is mystifying to me that this level of violence happens in our culture. How is it that our schools and workplaces, our malls and our restaurants, have become places where violence breaks out? I think there is something here about how we glorify violence and how we accept it. I’m not sure that this is a

media problem, a problem with how we see news, what movies we watch, or what music we hear within our culture; but I do think we have become immune to the level of violence that surrounds us, and it is only in horrific moments like we experienced this week that even we stop to think about it. Why aren't we thinking about how our culture glorifies violence when our news stations lead off every broadcast with the most violent happening and the most gruesome pictures? Why aren't we concerned when advertising for violent movies finds its way into the middle of a basketball game during what is considered "safe viewing" for our children? Why aren't we concerned when our video games are so life-like, and so help hand-eye coordination, that teenage shooters admit their killing sprees were helped by their video-game play? Why do we as a culture simultaneously bemoan the effects of violence and use our purchasing power to promote it? What does it mean to tend the flock when the flock is being inundated and taught violence? Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" How are we called to answer in the midst of the violence?

How are we called to answer the "Do you love me?" question in an age when 33 people dying on the campus of Virginia Tech manages to dominate the news for days while bombs kill five times that many in Bagdad; while the violence of oppression and world-wide indifference allow thousands to die in the genocide in Darfur; and while our government picks and chooses which human rights abuses they will fight in the name of political and economic expediency? We have to honestly ask what it means when Jesus calls us to tend his sheep on every part of the globe?

I believe also that we must struggle with what it means to answer the "Do you love me?" question in our dangerous times when the ability to get one's hands on a weapon seemingly has become a more protected right than the right to safety? I'm not a scholar when it comes to the Second Amendment, and I have to admit that I am speaking a bit on emotion here, but there seems to be something wrong with our culture when the politics of this issue continually prevents us from having a meaningful conversation about how and why gun violence seems to be such an epidemic. The numbers are devastating: In 2002, 3012 children and teens were killed by gunfire (Children's Defense Fund and National Center for Health Statistics). This is an epidemic, and we desperately need an open conversation about it. I am tired of having stilted conversations because we don't want to anger this or that constituency; children and youth are dying in unacceptably violent ways, and we cannot seem to summon the courage to speak to one another about it. Tend my sheep means having the difficult conversations and making difficult choices. Do we have the courage to have those conversations in this place or anywhere else for that matter?

Finally, I ache when I think about the place that Cho Seung Hui found himself in, and I wonder what we can do as a culture and as a church to make sure we don't have children who become young adults who, in the aftermath of tragedy, are noted to be loners, who were picked on as children, and thus found themselves in a desperate enough place that a violent reaction is required. I've never been to Blacksburg, Virginia; I never knew Cho Seung Hui; I never participated in isolating him. But I know that I have—by omission and, unfortunately, with deliberation at times—played a role in creating a world where some have access to the inner circle, where some have prestige, while others are kept at arms length from meaningful participation or success. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" and he was instructed to feed his sheep. Somehow I cannot escape the fact that our churches, our government, our

health care system, our schools, our media, and even I—and we—together have failed to adequately tend and feed the flock and there have been horrible and violent consequences. Jesus Christ was inviting Peter to participate in creating the kingdom of God here on earth, and that invitation is offered to us, too. There is no need for us to live in such violent and dangerous times. We need courage enough to follow Jesus when he asks us to; and we must summon up courage to follow him into the places that make us uncomfortable so they will no longer be dangerous. When people are dying in violent circumstances, when wars rage, when oppression rules, when people don't have adequate health care or adequate means for survival, when people are alienated from one another and even from themselves, we have not sufficiently done our work at tending the flock and feeding the sheep. When Jesus says to Peter (and to us) "Follow me," it didn't mean that Peter was on easy street; and neither are we. There are sheep to be fed and tended, nurtured and protected. The people of God are in need. We have work to do. Let's get to it! Thanks be to God. Amen.