

FEED MY SHEEP

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John 21:14-19

The commute from my home to the church is fairly straightforward. I exit my subdivision, turn left onto Highway 70, and I stay on that road until Highway 70 becomes West Main, and there's the church. I haven't gotten lost yet. I do know that if I get to the statue of the Confederate general I've gone too far.

About halfway along this route from my home to the church there is a marker which I notice each time I pass it. This marker designates that section of Highway 70 as being part of the Trail of Tears. The Trail of Tears marks an especially dark period in our nation's history. During the time of the Trail of Tears approximately 60,000 Native Americans were forcibly relocated from their ancestral homelands in the southeastern United States to the designated Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. These forced relocations were carried out by government authorities after the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Those who were removed were members of the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw nations. The journey to the Indian Territory was difficult and deadly. Thousands died along the way of exposure, starvation, and disease.

There is no single Trail of Tears from the southeast to the Indian Territory (which today is Oklahoma). The name refers to the event itself. The Trail of Tears consists of numerous routes across this part of the country.

The Choctaw were the first people moved to Oklahoma. Sixteen years after their relocation, in 1847, as the Choctaw were struggling to rebuild their lives in a strange, new place, an outsider attended one of their tribal meetings. This man represented the Memphis Irish Relief Committee. He read a letter from the committee. The committee was soliciting donations to assist the people of Ireland.

Why Ireland? Because 1847 marked the second year of the Irish Potato Famine—known in Ireland as The Great Hunger. In Ireland, at the time, the subsistence farmers relied on potatoes for their survival. Starting in 1845, a fungus-like organism destroyed the potato crops. Eventually, one million residents of Ireland would die of starvation and related causes.¹ The Choctaw knew too well about starvation in harsh conditions. They remembered being driven from their homes by US soldiers and forcibly marched to Oklahoma. They lost thousands of their people on the journey. The Choctaw answered the plea of the Irish people. Anonymous individuals pledged a total of \$170. That doesn't sound like much, but adjusting for inflation, today that would equal about \$5000—a monumental amount

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_\(Ireland\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_(Ireland))

of money for an impoverished community to donate to a people they had never met.² The Choctaw gave so that other people might have food.

Our reading for today from the closing chapter of the Gospel of John is also about feeding the hungry. If you will recall, last week we looked at the account of Peter and the other disciples fishing on the Sea of Galilee. They had been in Jerusalem but Jesus had been executed. Three days later he appeared to his followers who were gathered in a locked house. Jesus conferred upon them the power of the Holy Spirit and commissioned them to go out into the world to forgive sins. But they didn't. Peter and at least six other disciples instead go to Galilee—the home of some of them before they met Jesus. They returned to their old job of fishing, but they caught nothing. Jesus appears on the beach and suggests that they fish on the other side of the boat. They do and haul in a net bursting with fish. They go to Jesus, and he feeds them breakfast.

As we read today, when they had finished breakfast, Jesus turns to Simon Peter and poses a question. He asks, *Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?* First of all, is interesting that Jesus uses Peter's 'legal' name. Peter is just a nickname. It means rock. Today, we would call him Rocky. But Jesus employs Peter's full name as if to remind us that Jesus knows exactly who he is. Earlier in this gospel, Jesus describes the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. He says, *[The shepherd] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out* (John 10:3).

Jesus calls Peter by name asking if he loves him *more than these*. Unfortunately, we don't know what *these* refers to. We can't see what Jesus is pointing towards. Our first assumption is that Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him more than these disciples—the others who are there with them. I've always thought that was a harsh thing for Jesus to ask. It's like a parent asking a child, "Do you love me more than your brothers and sisters?" Instead, I like to think that Jesus is pointing at the boat and the fishing nets asking if Peter loves him more than he loves his old way of life—before he met Jesus. And Peter responds, *Yes, Lord; you know that I love you*. So, Jesus tells him, *Feed my lambs*. This simple command marks Peter's transition from fisherman to becoming the shepherd of Jesus' people.

That account of the disciples catching the net full of fish is commonly regarded as an evangelism story—Jesus showing his disciples how to bring people to the faith. But we know that there is more to it than that. You can't catch fish in a net and then drag the net onto the beach and forget about them. They'll quickly die and rot and become a huge stink. You can't invite people to Christ and then ignore them. They need to be cared for like sheep. They need a shepherd to guide and protect them, to provide them with spiritual nourishment. They come to Christ because they are hungry. That is why Jesus commands Peter to *Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep*.

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/05/13/coronavirus-irish-fundraiser-native-american>

Three times Jesus puts this question to Peter: *Do you love me?* And each time Peter answers, *Yes*. But the third time, Peter gets a bit testy because Jesus keeps asking him the same question.

I find it enlightening that Jesus repeats this question three times. Doing so magnifies its significance. What if every major inquiry in our lives were repeated like this? For example, I've got some weddings on the calendar. What if, in those weddings, I posed the marriage questions three times? What if I asked the groom, "Do you take this woman to be your wife?" The first time, he would say, "Yes, of course" (just like she had instructed him to do). The second time he might say "yes" a bit more forcefully because he had already said it once. The third time, he might say, "Hey, I've answered you twice now. Why don't you believe me?" It's that third time that underscores the magnitude of the question. This is important.

In Peter's case, the thrice-spoken question brings to mind his own behavior from just a few days earlier when he was asked if he was associated with Jesus. Three times he is asked and three times he denies knowing Jesus. When Jesus asks Peter, *Do you love me?* there is an element of forgiveness accompanying the question. Jesus knows Peter, knows what he has done, and yet he forgives. Not only does he forgive, but he charges Peter with shepherding his sheep.

As we know, Peter goes on to become a great shepherd of the church. Roman Catholics regard Peter as the first Pope, and I won't argue with them. Peter became the head of the church in Jerusalem. He preached tirelessly telling the story of Jesus to all people. He organized and administrated the growing movement of believers. And, he fed people. Literally. Jesus instructed, *Feed my sheep*, and Peter initiated a fund to help the widows and orphans in Jerusalem. Christian missionaries across the world, including the Apostle Paul, collected money for this fund and delivered it to Jerusalem. Peter kept his word to Jesus; he fed and cared for Jesus' flock.

Back on that beach, after asking the third question, Jesus tells a sort of parable. He tells Peter, *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.* At first reading, it sounds like Jesus is describing anyone's life. When we are young, we put on our clothes and we do whatever we want. When we get old, others will dress us and guide us around. But Jesus is speaking specifically to Peter. And Peter, as tradition tells us, was, like Jesus, crucified. This statement is a warning that following Jesus involves sacrifice, possibly death. For Peter, it won't be a belt, but a chain that will be tied around his waist. With this chain, he will be led to his death. His arms will be stretched out over a cross. Despite this, Jesus invites Peter saying, *Follow me*. Peter does follow Jesus and he becomes a leader of those who also follow Christ. Peter cared for and fed the sheep.

Remember that story about the Choctaw people sending money to Ireland in 1847 to feed the hungry there? There's more to it. Today, Native Americans, especially those on reservations, have been hit hard by the COVID pandemic. Their suffering is higher than average because of health factors associated with their poverty. Many live in close quarters with multiple generations in the same house. They have limited access to health care. They disproportionately suffer from health issues such as obesity, diabetes, asthma, and heart disease. They are targets for the coronavirus.

To assist Native Americans, a special fund has been established for families in the Hopi and Navajo reservations in Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. Can you guess who is stepping up with massive donations? The Irish. They remember. They remember the generosity of the Native Americans from two centuries ago. So far, 24,000 donors from Ireland have contributed over \$800,000 to the Native Americans in their time of need.

Today, in our country, with an unemployment rate of 14.7%³ and projected to hit 25%⁴, we can expect to confront difficult economic times for many years. As a church, we are going to need to consider seriously Jesus' injunction to feed his sheep. There are going to be people who need nourishment for their souls as well as their bodies. We are already seeing the newly unemployed lining up for food. This is going to continue for some time. The food lines are going to get longer. Jesus continues to call his disciples to feed his sheep. The church will need to respond.

³ <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/13/economy/jobs-unemployment-rate-goldman-sachs/index.html>