

“Responding to Love with Love”  
Psalm 23  
John 21:1-19  
April 15, 2007

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Lake Forest, Illinois  
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“Do you love me?” Jesus asks; if you do, then show it this way; he says, “Feed my sheep.”

We get this message in spades here at this church, and because I’ve been here such a short time still, I can brag about your work here without taking credit for it. Long before I arrived at this pulpit, you had been feeding Jesus’ sheep in countless ways. Sometimes I marvel at the works of compassion and mission you accomplish. Today we’re celebrating Stephen Ministers, carefully trained church members who shepherd others here who are going through difficult change. Quietly, confidentially, one-on-one meetings occur, week after week, so that people going through illness or divorce, a crisis or a chronic condition, don’t have to walk that path alone. It’s a fabulous gift, to have a Christian friend with whom you can be transparent, whether you’re feeling faithful or totally wretched any given day.

Or take the work of the Deacons. Right now they’re engulfed in the work of the Auction, which raises boatloads of money for mission. But the work I admire most is their unsung compassion to our neighbors ... compassion they make it easy for us to join. Half a dozen guys got up in the middle of the night one day this week to make breakfast for 45 homeless men at PADS. Another bunch of folks cook regularly for Soup Kitchen. Another group tutor kids with Reading Power. Within our own congregation, Deacons divide the Sunday morning flowers into separate vases and take them to our shut-ins every week, and pull out the silver service and table cloths and provide receptions after funerals. They do more to feed Christ’s hungry sheep than I can begin to count ... and we’re invited to work alongside them. A list of opportunities is in your bulletin this morning; consider signing on to something. You won’t regret it.

“Do you love me? Feed my sheep,” Jesus instructs us, and I could go on and on with the ways our congregation tends the hungry in body or hungry in spirit. The Rainbows program for kids who have lost a parent through death or divorce. The Senior High’s annual Work Trip. The ministry we support in Muyobamba, Peru. The funds we raise from the Rummage Sale.

Then there’s the ministry we do *beyond* First Church’s institutional auspices. I don’t need to remind you that the church is not the organization; the church is the *people*. You people are modest, which is not only charming but appropriate. You don’t boast about your leadership, so I end up finding out your commitments obliquely. Offhand I know our people currently chair the boards of the Boys & Girls Club, the Night Ministry, the Greater Chicago Food Depository, and I’m certain this just scratches the surface. It’s not just the adults, either. One of our youth just received an award from the city of Highland Park for her work tutoring

children, and she's heading up EarthWeek at the high school this week. I've begun to wonder how many good works members of our congregation support through time and money -- helping children and families, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, providing education, medicine, culture, green spaces, and so on to people who couldn't otherwise afford it. It is frankly staggering. You *get it* about expressing your faith by feeding Christ's sheep. And I *love it about you*.

So when Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" and then tells Peter, "show your love by feeding my sheep," I could end the sermon here, happily enough, encouraging you to keep doing the things you've already been doing.

Except that I'd be skipping something crucial. The first question Jesus asks Peter isn't just "Do you love me?" but "'Do you love me more than these?" The Greek makes it clear that he isn't asking "Peter, do you love me more than these other people love me?" Jesus is asking, "Peter, do you love me more than you love these?" I don't think Jesus is asking Peter if he loves him more than he loves his livelihood, his fishing, or even the abundance of the fish that he pulled in. Peter has already demonstrated his willingness to leave his fishing nets behind to follow Jesus. Jesus is asking Peter, "Do you love me more than you love these, these other people ... the other disciples, your friends, your fellow travelers in faith?" In other words, Jesus is asking Peter not just "do you love me?" but "do you love me *first*?"

Now why would Jesus ask this of Peter? Jesus is hardly an egomaniac; he doesn't have a narcissistic bone in his body. I think Jesus asks this of Peter for *Peter's* sake ... and for the sake of the sheep whom Peter is called to feed.

First, Jesus is reminding us that we don't feed his sheep because they're loveable; we feed his sheep because we love Jesus. Frankly, some of Jesus' sheep are not easy to love ... but we love them because they're *Jesus'* sheep. Even when they're a pain in the neck. You know what I mean. At my church in Clarendon Hills, we housed the PADS shelter on Saturday nights, and while most of our guests were polite, respectful and grateful, there was one guy who every month or so stuck around for worship – a good thing – and hit up our members for money – not so good. We didn't shelter and feed this man because he was loveable; we did it because we loved Jesus, and this is one of his sheep. It's not just so-called "needy" people who can be difficult to love. Every church has its share of members who are notoriously annoying. But we don't love each other because we're charming, or because we agree on everything, for that matter. This isn't a club, or a fraternity. It's Jesus' family, and we love each other, we feed each other, because we love Jesus, and he cares about each and every one of his sheep.

That's the first reason Jesus asks us, do we love him more than these ... because if we don't we will be tempted to pick and choose which of his sheep we will feed. And the second

reason is like it: if we try to love all his sheep on our own, we will burn out. We need, for our own sake, for our own energy, to keep our flame of love for Jesus burning, or we will quickly run out of steam when we try to love his sheep. In her poignant memoir *Leaving Church*, the extraordinary preacher Barbara Brown Taylor confesses the burn-out she felt in church-life, such a deep burn-out that she left the ministry altogether: “For most of my adult life, what I have wanted most to win is nearness to God,” she confesses. So, she says,

“I gave myself to the work the best way I knew how, which sometimes exhausted my parishioners as much as it exhausted me. I thought that being faithful meant always trying harder to live a holier life and calling them to do the same. I thought that it meant knowing everything I could about scripture and theology, showing up every time the church doors were open, and never saying no to anyone in need. I thought that it meant ignoring my own needs and those of my family until they went away altogether, leaving me free to serve God without any selfish desires to drag me down. ... And it was not until this project failed that I began to wonder if my human wholeness might be more useful to God than my exhausting goodness” (*Leaving Church* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 218-9).

Thank God she came to see it clearly, that which most of us only vaguely feel: we cannot do this enterprise of mission by our own power. We cannot open our hands over and over again if we are never fed. We can never *be* Jesus; we can only *love* Jesus, and remind ourselves how much we are loved by him. Only when we are refreshed by Jesus’ love for us, just as we are, will we have some real love to share with others, others who are just as hungry as we are.

“Here is the secret of all Christian ministry,” says Biblical scholar N.T. Wright.

“Here is the secret of all Christian ministry, yours and mine, lay and ordained. ... It’s the secret of everything from being a quiet, back-row member of a prayer group to being a platform speaker at huge rallies and conferences. If you are going to do any single solitary thing as a follower and servant of Jesus, this is what it’s built on. Somewhere, deep down inside, there is a love for Jesus, and though (goodness knows) you’ve let him down enough times, he wants to find that love, to give you a chance to express it, to heal the hurts and failures ... and give you a new work to do” (*John for Everyone, Part II* (London and Louisville: SPCK/Westminster/John Knox, 2002, 2004), p. 165, cited by Agnes W. Norfleet in her paper for the 2007 Moveable Feast preaching consortium).

Somewhere, deep down inside, there is a love for Jesus. And it is the wellspring of everything we’re blessed to do. “Do you love me? Do you love me more than these? Then you can do this: Feed my sheep ... feed my hungry, hungry sheep.” Amen.