

June 3rd, 2007

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

Feed My Lambs

John 21:15-19

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John 21:15-19 (NLT)

15 After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "you know I love you."

"Then feed my lambs," Jesus told him.

16 Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

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

"Then take care of my sheep," Jesus said.

17 A third time he asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep.

18 "I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go." 19 Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, "Follow me."

Good morning. Before I begin, I just want to explain something. What I am about to say today is not a sermon. I am not preaching. To me, preaching is what someone does to explain what he or she has already done, so now you need to do the same. But I know, you know, and God knows, I don't have it all together. So rather than a sermon, let's make this a discourse, a dialogue that continues. Only, one thing I ask, please hold your comments until the end, so that we are not here for three hours!

Let's pray. God, please bless these hearts and these minds in the next few minutes, that we would discern for ourselves what Your will is, how to more truly follow You, and to learn what it means to be the Church, the body of Christ. Lord, think Your thoughts through me, speak Your words through these unworthy lips. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Today, obviously, is Graduation Sunday. To that effect, I hope what I say today will encourage both the graduating seniors here, and the congregation who supports these and other youth in our community. I believe that this young generation is facing a crisis that we have never seen before in this country, and I also believe that if we can understand Jesus' commands to Peter in the passage we just read, we will be able to step in and rescue this generation. To that end, I would strongly encourage that you keep your Bibles open to John 21 as we go along.

First, I offer this picture as an analogy to what this young generation is facing. (Picture of hurricane over entire state of Florida, with an arrow. "We are here.") We are seeing a generation lost in the midst of a powerful storm. "We are here," they exclaim, but they are buffeted by winds, known as popular culture. "We are here," says the church, but in the onslaught of anti-Judeo-Christian media, where is our voice? "We are here." It's lost in the wind.

This crisis has been referred to as the “Rise and Fall of the Evangelicals.” In four years of youth ministry, I have come upon this theme again and again. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not a statistician, but when I hear these numbers, my gut says, yes, that’s what I am seeing, and so are other youth ministers around the country.

According to Teen Mania Ministries, 65% of the World War II Generation were Bible-believing Christians. After them, 35% of the Baby Boomers carried the same values. Then, my generation, Generation X, had merely 16% following their footsteps. And today, a pitiful 4% of this generation, the Millennials, are true, Bible-believing, born-again Christians.

This has never happened before in the history of America, that so few would follow Jesus. This is not to say that they don’t believe in God. In fact, most Americans, about 90%, say that they do believe in God, and most teenagers are quite receptive of spiritual beliefs. But what are they believing? The number one religion in teenagers right now is M.T.D.: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. As Mark Osterreicher, president of Youth Specialties, puts it, MTD means: Be good. Feel good. Good people go to heaven. God is wallpaper.

I hear a lot of adults say, “Kids aren’t interested in attending church.” I would counter, kids are very interested in church, but, as Kendra Creasy Dean put it, youth are looking for a passionate church. If they don’t find passion here, then they will look somewhere else.

So, I want to ask the graduates few rhetorical questions. What type of legacy are you going to leave? Whose life will be better because you were here? What passion has God granted you to use for his glory? Will you pursue it?

And to all of us here, myself included, I ask, will you learn from Peter’s example today to become passionate followers of Jesus Christ? Let’s look at three things that Jesus asked Peter to do, and by applying them, I believe we can continue to be the passionate church that will rescue this young generation. A church that will survive and grow in the following years until Jesus returns.

Jesus asked Peter to do three basic things, and as I wrote my sermon...excuse me, my message..., I realized that they all start with the letter F. Isn’t that just a God-thing?

The first command was this: **FORGIVE!**

Let’s be honest for a moment. How many of us here have a hard time forgiving certain other people in our lives? Come on, let me see the hands. Who are the hardest people to forgive? My vote is for close family. I did grow up with two brothers, after all. And my mom? Whoo-boy, let’s just say that we both have to practice forgiveness a lot with each other.

Forgiveness is necessary and often times not as easy as it sounds. But really, the hardest people to forgive are closer than family. They are ourselves. Look at the text today, verses 15-17. Peter had to forgive himself, and Jesus knew it. I like the way it’s worded in the InterVarsity Press Bible commentary. “The Great Physician had to perform painful but necessary surgery on Peter’s pride.” Look backwards in this passage for a moment. The disciples are fishing. Jesus

arrives and gives them a miraculous catch. John leans over to Peter and says, "It's the Lord!" Peter gets so excited that he jumps out of the boat and swims to shore. Then, he drags the net full of fish to the shore, all by himself. He was still trying to impress everyone. He was trying to impress Jesus. He was trying to overcome his mistake in the past, namely, denying Jesus publicly three times the night before the crucifixion, even though less than 12 hours before that, he had boasted that even if everyone abandoned Jesus, he, Peter, would never leave. So, Peter had to deal with his pride, and forgive himself, stop wallowing in self pity, and truly start following Jesus.

In a beautiful and loving way, Jesus gets Peter to forgive himself. See, Jesus had already forgiven Peter. At the Last Supper, Jesus predicted Peter's denial. He knew it would happen. And when it did, the Bible says, Peter wept bitterly. But on the cross, Jesus said, "It is finished." No more wrath. No more sacrifices. One sacrifice did it all. Our sins are forgiven. Period. Yours, mine, and Peter's.

But Peter was still hanging on to his past, trying to out-do the disciples, and make up for his previous mistakes. He hadn't forgiven himself, and Jesus knew it.

So, Jesus, the master surgeon, has to remove this pride from Peter's heart once and for all. He knows it won't be possible for Peter to move forward and lead the new church if he doesn't get this very important point.

There at the beach, three times, Jesus asks Peter the question, "Do you love me?" This is in fact the greatest question of all faith. Do you love Jesus? Peter answers, Yes, but the third time, Peter is cut to the heart. He finally gets it. His pride is stripped away.

We have to deal with our own sin and pride if we expect to be useful to Christ and to his kingdom.

Two weeks ago, I was in Tawas, where a very sad and yet very exciting thing has happened. Over 100 people have left the Methodist church and have formed a new fellowship, which they plan to found as a new church start. The very first time that they met, the preacher (who also wasn't preaching, if you know what I mean), said, that forgiveness must be the cornerstone of the new church.

We must make forgiveness a priority. We must learn to ask God for forgiveness. We must forgive ourselves. And then, it follows, we must forgive others. If I have heard anything from those that resist the church, it's because of the hypocrite conspiracy. Where does this come from? Luke 7:47 says, those who are forgiven little, love little. But those who are forgiven much, love much. We must exude in our everyday life a spirit of forgiveness, mercy, kindness, the fruit of the Spirit. They will smell us out!

So, Jesus' first command to Peter, and to us, is FORGIVE. Start by asking God to forgive you. Then, ask him to help you forgive yourself, and finally, to help you to forgive others. And when you do, you can move on to the second command.

FOLLOW ME!

Peter goes on in the passage to say, what about John? Jesus answers, don't worry, just follow me.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? Obey his commands. Love one another. Most importantly, meet together and be the body of Christ.

To you graduates, I say this. Don't graduate from your faith. Seek out a Bible-believing fellowship in college. There are dozens of them! InterVarsity (or IV for short), Wesleyan House, Campus Crusade are just a few of the many great, Bible-believing groups found on campuses all over. And by all means, find a church! As it says in Revelation 2:4, Don't forsake the love of your youth!

My experience in two colleges taught me the enormous help of a regular fellowship. At Northwestern, although I faithfully attended church, I didn't have close Christian friends who kept me accountable. I got into a relationship that didn't honor God. I compromised many times, kept silent in my belief of right and wrong. But in grad-school at Purdue, my regular involvement with University Church and I.V. brought me through a depression and introduced me to full-time ministry. Students, parents, friends, everybody, we need that structure that a good Christian fellowship provides!

The Bible warns the church in Hebrews 10:25, don't give up meeting together! Be a part of this! The Bride of Christ is a beautiful place.

Jesus says, Follow me. Follow me. Look around you at the awesome examples going on before you. Nine adults going on the mission trip in July said, yes, Jesus, we will follow you. The volunteers for VBS have said, Yes, Jesus, we will follow you. A long time ago, or not so long, a young man named Calvin Long, out of Colman, MI, said, yes, Jesus, I will follow you, even if I don't know how I'm going to pay for seminary. A young woman named Beth said, I will follow you, Jesus, even if it means following my husband wherever the church sends him, raising two children in four or five different schools. The Sunday school teachers heard, "Follow me" and are here every Sunday morning. The choir. The Tuesday morning visitors. I could go on, but I think you understand.

The Christian faith is about following Jesus, no matter what. Yes, it's a roller coaster. Yes, there are bumps, bruises, but Jesus still says, "Follow me." If you get off track, go back to step one. Forgive. Then follow. If you have any breath left in your lungs, praise Jesus. If you have any strength left in your arms, serve him. Are you dead yet? No? Good! Then God isn't finished with you.

I realize today that there might be someone here who hasn't decided to follow Jesus. To them, I ask, what's stopping you? Maybe you believe in him, but he's not number one. Jesus has to be the center of your life. What's at your center? What are you living for? Your family? Your job? Your money? Why can't Jesus be in charge of all that?

Follow me, Jesus says. So, we have learned that we must forgive, then follow, and now we come to the third command, the point that ties it all back together to the picture of the storm that I showed. Forgive, follow, and now, feed my lambs. This is a natural result of obeying the first two commands.

We see in this passage that three times, Jesus commands Peter to be a shepherd. The InterVarsity commentary claims that there is no special distinction to Jesus' commands, "Feed my lambs, care for my sheep, and feed my sheep." In truth, all are part of the shepherd's job.

However, at a conference Katja, Elmer Sikema, and I went to a conference in Lansing last October, Pastor Blaine Bartell, youth pastor for Oneighty ministries, the largest youth ministry America, in Tulsa, OK, said, it's interesting that Jesus gives this command first. "Feed my lambs." Shepherding involves a lot of things. But Blaine noted that Jesus mentioned the lambs first because he understood the importance of reaching the young, both in age and in faith. Who are the most vulnerable in the flock? Think about it. Lions go after the weakest, and while aged sheep may be weak, they at least benefit from experience. Not so the young. They are the easiest targets.

What are we seeing in America today? The smallest percentage of Bible-believing Christians ever. And, coincidentally, the largest generation of teenagers ever in America. They – you, graduates - will set the pace for the next 30 years, as the baby boomers did before you did. And what are the lions doing? Check out these hard realities: Point-and-click pornography, terrorism, violence in schools, drugs, STD's and teen pregnancy. Most of these come in the name of making a profit for companies. Each year, billions of dollars goes into merchandize, media and research. Take the rise of energy drinks. Commercials on TV for Valtrex, a medication to treat herpes. The biggest consequence that I now see, as a result of all this advertising, is low self esteem, across the board, in our young people. The lions are having a heyday, and in some cases, the church is acting like the flock after an attack. The lions sit there, eating their prey, while the flock just goes on grazing.

Graduate, your generation needs to be rescued, not for the sake of the church tomorrow, but for the sake of the church today. For the sake of Christ. I remember as a child watching my dad, a veterinarian, delivering sheep at a farm. My dad had to perform CPR on several of these tiny, fragile, new-born lambs. Together, we need to breathe new life into our young people. The enemy is cleaning our clock. We can't just fight with our pinkie. We must use our whole hand, make a fist and throw a punch.

So, how do you feed Jesus' lambs? It starts with a relationship. Relationships are the heart of any ministry, especially youth ministry. We must exude the genuineness, passion, and inclusiveness that young people seek. We must be intergenerational. Are you feeding yourself or feeding the lambs? Mark Yaconelli once told a story about a youth who, on his way to church, would just start giggling and cracking up. Why? Because he knew, HE KNEW, the instant he arrived, he would be immersed in love, hugs, questions, concerns, and so on. People would know his name. People would contact him outside of Sundays. This isn't rocket science. This is, in many cases, what the church has been doing all along. We need to do it like their lives depend on it. This is CPR for the soul.

The crisis in our culture has been described by Ron Luce as a burning car wreck. If we came upon one on the side of the road, we wouldn't hesitate to go in and pull the youth out. Someone once reached out to us. Who will we reach?

This is your challenge today. To the graduates. To the church. To me. Are you going to step up and be the church, the heroes who rescue this generation? Where it goes, we go. Imagine all the stores owners, the public safety workers, the churches and pastors. Who do you want serving you when you are old? Honorable, God-fearing youth? I do!

What will all this feeding entail? Let's look ahead a bit in John 21. I find it interesting that Jesus tells Peter he would be forced to go somewhere he didn't want to, and this would glorify God. Tradition has it he was crucified upside-down, because he didn't consider himself worthy of the crucifixion Christ had. I guess he learned the true meaning of humility and obedience.

Feeding the lambs might mean that we have to endure something we don't personally like for the sake of bringing life and light to someone who doesn't believe. Like: loud music, strange clothes. One of my favorite cartoons as a child was Bloom County. Unfortunately, I can't find my old comic books, but there is one story I remember vividly. Somehow, the middle school boys get Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones to perform at a school dance. The town folk in this small, conservative community blow a gasket, with protests and all manner of disgruntlement. The local Moose Lodge has an emergency meeting. The grand moose, in full uniform, including antlers, calls the rowdy meeting to order and solicits the member's comments about the Rolling Stones. "They're weird!" says one member. "They dress funny!" "They make strange noises!" The grand moose says, "All those in favor of condemning this entire event, signify your vote with the secret moose call." "Bloop, bloop, bloop!"

We must feed the lambs, and yes, it will involve some discomfort, but it will also involve great joy. Feed the lambs. Be passionate about youth, your friends, your neighbors, your children, your grandchildren. Your neighbor's grandchildren! Be passionate about the graduates here today. Are you still breathing? Good! God can use you!

I am going to lay down a challenge for you today. Will you begin, as I endeavor to do, to pray daily for this lost generation? My vision for the youth ministry in this church is for everyone person in these pews to be connected to at least one young person. My vision is to have every young person who ever sets foot in our church know that someone is praying for them. Each fall, I will make prayer cards for the kids currently on my mailing list. Would you adopt one of them? I have two books, one *Battle Cry for a Generation*, by Ron Luce, and *The Last Christian Generation* by Josh McDowell. Pastor Cal and I have already read them. Would you be one of ten new people that would take up this challenge and read one of these two books?

I will give you an opportunity now to make that step, as I sing a song called *The Vow*, by Geoff Moore. The words will be up on the screen, and as we reach the last verse, you will see a change in the words, going from "I" to "we". At this point, will you join in and sing the last chorus with me?

The Vow

Verse 1

I could make a promise to you,
 But that would be too easy to do.
 You see I've made them before,
 And broken them and they're no good anymore.
 So I'll dig a little bit deeper,
 Give you something you can keep
 I will make a vow to you,
 And it will never change no matter what I do.

Verse 2

As the words fall from my lips,
 We both know the life I live,
 How I stumble and fall,
 How many times I land short of the call.
 I will confess my inadequacy,
 Throw myself into the mystery.
 That somehow in the death of your love,
 You will help me do what I'm not capable of.

Chorus 1

Right here, right now,
 In the midst of the crowd,
 I stand alone and make my vow.
 Whatever it takes I will be faithful
 This is my vow.

Chorus 2

Right here, right now,
 In the midst of the crowd,
 We stand together make our vow.
 Whatever it takes we will be faithful.
 Right here, right now,
 Let there be no doubt.
 With every whisper and every shout,

Let the whole world know we will be faithful,

This is our vow.

This is our vow.

We make our vow.

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