

John 21:15-17

"Dance With the One Who Brung You"

On New Year's Day of 1960, the Texas Longhorns were to play the Syracuse Orangemen, as they were known then, in the Cotton Bowl. Syracuse was not only ranked number one in all the polls but also had the number one defense in the nation. Texas was the underdog at a distant 4th.

The Longhorn's coach, Darrell Royal, was known for two things. His dislike for the passing game and his zingy one-liners. When asked by a sports reporter if his team would reevaluate their tendency to be a running team when playing against the number one defense he replied, "You got to dance with the one who brung you."

What Royal meant was you have to stick with what works. You can't change horses in the middle of the stream. And I thought of his words as I read this post-resurrection story of Jesus and Peter on the beach. Of course, this passage is more often preached on immediately after Easter, when we all have Peter's denial of Jesus three times still fresh in our minds. As we celebrate our new life, given to us when Jesus conquered death on the cross, we are reminded that Jesus gives Peter three times to declare his love for him, erasing his past sins.

But in essence he is saying, "If you really love me Peter, then just keep on doing what you have been doing. Feed. Tend. Love. Just as you have seen me do, as I have taught you to do. Don't change horses in the middle of the stream. Dance with the one who brung you."

I think this is a powerful and timely message for us all as I preach my last sermon here as your Interim Pastor. You see, when I came here, I had a plan. I would get you ready for your next pastor by celebrating all that you had done *well* as a church family in the past and helping

you all reevaluate things that had not worked so well, paving the way for a smooth beginning. This IS after all, the role of the Interim. It is the definition of Interim Ministry.

But as I thought about the 20 months that I have served as your Interim pastor, I realized how appropriate Jesus' words to Peter are for the body of Christ at Nazareth as well. Because one of the hardships of being the Interim minister here is that you do so many things well!! Hardly anything needed changing! This group of disciples has a history of feeding, taking care of, loving and serving. So in much the same way that Jesus instructed Peter to keep doing what he had been doing, I will say the same to you.

While I am sure that the theology of grace was at work when Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, giving him three chances for repentance, that doesn't mean that we can completely disregard the rest of the message. If we love Jesus, we are called to tend and to feed God's sheep. Yet, in the original Greek, Jesus' words actually had different meaning.

First Jesus told Peter to FEED the lambs. The Greek word "feed" actually means "to pasture". And during the Interim period, the Session and then the church as a whole has redefined the mission here as to "make disciples for Christ." In other words, we have claimed our Mission at Nazareth be intentional about FEEDING God's sheep, about pasturing others. But we basically have given more emphatic words to something that has historically been done well here anyway.

You have pastured the body of Christ at Nazareth by making this an inviting and welcoming church home so that new sheep have joined the fold over the years. Many of you have heard how Joan Houghton used to hear the church bell ring every Sunday morning until she finally decided to find out where it was coming from. When she discovered the bells were

literally in her back yard and felt the welcome spirit and outreach of love from the congregation, the Houghton family became a vital part of the ministry here.

I went out to dinner with a group of ladies in my neighborhood this week who visited the church a few months ago to hear me preach. Several of them are planning on coming to the Installation this afternoon and were recounting their visit here to a *new* neighbor who did not come with them before. One of them said, "I've never seen anything like it. When they 'Pass the Peace', instead of just turning around with a polite handshake, they walk all over the place hugging and welcoming everyone. It is the friendliest church I have ever been to." She did say that before worship they received an icy reception from a few ladies who thought they were a search committee, but after that misunderstanding was cleared up they received the normal Nazareth welcome. What a wonderful job of pasturing God's people you all do here in so many ways, providing a safe and welcoming place for others to grow in faith.

The second time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him he commands him to TEND his sheep. However, what he really asks Peter to do is to lead, to rule over, to shepherd his sheep. Again, this is something that you all seem to have a knack for. There are many adults here who are serving in leadership roles in the church who were raised right here at Nazareth. Ashley Whitfield, Candy Franklin, Kim Cansler, Cassie Yarborough, Ashley Maul, Shalynn Crawford, Allison Hoffman to name a few. Through the commitment of the church to honor your baptismal vows, you all have given the children of this church the opportunity to explore their faith, to mature in their beliefs and to learn how to become the leaders for the next generation. You have TENDED the sheep well.

I also see this leading the sheep in the ways that the children and youth are a priority at Nazareth today. The Young Disciples never cease to amaze me with their Biblical knowledge

when we have our time together. This is evidence not only of good parenting but conscientious Sunday School teachers as well. The success of Vacation Bible School with a wide variety of participation and sharing of gifts is another way that Nazareth tends God's sheep.

We also have wonderful participation at Youth Events throughout the Presbytery and a great group of Youth that attend Montreat every year. It is always a joy to have them come home and share how much their faith has been challenged and how they have grown in their time together. And our own Makayla Medina was recently chosen to be a member of the Presbyterian Youth Council, the group of young people that makes plans and decisions for all the Youth in our Presbytery.

Finally, Jesus asks Peter one more time about his love and then instructs him to "Feed" his sheep again. But this time, he does so in the context of loving and serving. When I think of all the ways that Nazareth reaches out to the community and the world, I realize that this instruction from Jesus is also taken to heart here. This church literally feeds God's sheep through work at The Carpenter's Table and the Soup Kitchen, through the Pennies for Hunger and the Backpack Ministry. We also reach out to the lonely through Meals on Wheels, Thornwell and Presbyterian Communities. We participate on larger scale with our support of Unterwegs in Germany and the Café Justo ministry in Mexico and a variety of other special offerings and services that you are all eager to participate in.

This congregation also excels at feeding God's sheep by loving one another in times of joy and sorrow. Often when I visit a sick person in the hospital or in their home, I learn that I just missed another of our disciples who had been there before me to bring flowers, hugs and love. The prayer chain is a vital ministry here and one of the most important ways we can serve one another and draw closer to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Even the beautiful, historic

cemetery and the hospitality we offer as a church to a grieving family answers Jesus' call to feed his sheep.

So when I paraphrase Jesus' words by saying "Dance with the one who brought you" it is simply a reminder to honor your past by continuing to do the things you are doing. But it is also a call to do more. I would love to see some Mission Trips on the horizon, for both youths and adults and even more hands on caring and tending as we seek to serve the Lord together. There are plans to start a class for the many young adults here. And the Session is always eager to hear from YOU about what ways you feel called to make disciples.

But perhaps the most important point that Jesus makes to Peter and to us is to remember WHO it is that you came to the dance with! Jesus Christ. This is why John ends this Gospel the way he does. The other Gospels end with such a dramatic flair. Matthew ends with the Great Commission and Jesus' promise to always be with us. Mark and Luke end with Jesus' ascension into Heaven, leaving us with the anticipation of his return.

But John ends the same way it begins. With Jesus calling his disciples to follow him. John begins by saying that Jesus' light has been shining on us and waiting to become a part of our lives since before the foundation of the earth. John concludes by saying that while the earthly drama of the life of Jesus Christ is coming to an end the disciples' drama of feeding and tending and loving has just begun. But we all must remember who it is that invited us to the dance in the first place.

I can never express how humbled I am by the trust that you have placed in me to have my name added to the list of gifted pastors who have preceded me at Nazareth – in recent years Joe Wagner, Sid Gunter, Mark Durrett and David Sutton. I am not only overjoyed but a little scared to be the next Installed Pastor. Yet, knowing that the Holy Spirit had such a hand in calling this

body of Christ to have me stay on here, I have faith that God has a plan for all of us to feed, tend and love as we make disciples for Christ together.

But I have also heard about the very last sermon that David Sutton preached here before his retirement and the wisdom that he left you with. And I would like to end my time as your interim and transition into becoming the Installed pastor in the same way. It is my understanding that David left the pulpit, walked down among you and said something like this: "I know that from this day on you are going to be focused on the pulpit and wondering who is going to fill it. But I am going to ask you to look beyond the pulpit to the cross."

Friends, we are called to keep our eyes on the cross. To feed, to tend, to love in the name of our Triune God, who loves us so much that he would not create us and then leave us as we are. Instead our God dwelt among us in the person of God's son and lives with us still by the power of the Holy Spirit. So no matter who is standing in the pulpit, each of us here is called to dance with the one who brought you. Our Savior, Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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