

# St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Fourth Sunday of Easter ✠

May 7, 2006

*Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe*

**“When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?”**

**“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”**

**Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”**

**Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?”**

**He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”**

**Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”**

**The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”**

**Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”**

**Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”**

**(John 21:15-17, NIV)**

For many people, the image of the Good Shepherd is their favorite in all the Bible. And I think that’s entirely appropriate, considering how well that picture of a shepherd helps us to understand God’s watchful care over us. It reminds us how God provides everything we need, how he protects us from danger, how he leads us on the path through life. And all of those truths we find on the pages of Scripture when they again and again describe our God as our shepherd.

You know, I think that this Bible picture is especially appealing to those who serve the Lord as pastors. For not only does it describe how the Lord shepherds his flock, but the Lord actually calls some of those sheep to be shepherds under him. The word pastor even means “shepherd.” So at the same time that pastors view the Lord Jesus caring for them, they also see in him a model for the service they do for others.

But I don’t think this special appreciation has to be limited to pastors. For Jesus has also given to all of us a part of that work which he does. We see an example of that in our text for today. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, but he also sends out shepherds. He sends out shepherds who have been moved by his forgiveness to care for his flock.

In the days following his resurrection, Jesus appeared several times to his disciples. And he spent that time with them, calming their fears, teaching them from the Scriptures, and giving them instructions for the work they were to do after he was gone. Our text describes one of those appearances.

On this occasion, Jesus appeared to the disciples who were out on the lake fishing. They had been out there all night and had not caught a thing, but Jesus called to them from shore and at his word they caught a multitude of fish. Now that they had eaten, Jesus spoke these words of our text to Simon Peter. But why does Jesus speak these words to Peter? Why does he ask Peter 3 times **“do you love me?”**?

Most people see in these words a parallel between this and the three times Peter denied Jesus and they suggest that here Jesus is announcing to Peter that he was forgiven and was reinstating him as an apostle

But you might wonder why Jesus didn't do this earlier. This isn't the first time that Jesus appeared to Peter after his resurrection. Luke's Gospel even says that on Easter Sunday Jesus appeared to *just* Peter. And Peter was there when Jesus appeared behind locked doors and said "**Peace be with you.**" Actually, Peter must have already known Jesus' forgiveness long before this day.

Peter might have already known of Jesus' forgiveness just after the rooster crowed and when Jesus looked straight at him. Perhaps he already knew it when he wept bitterly in repentance. Or maybe Peter knew that when Jesus said from the cross, "**It is finished,**" that meant *his* forgiveness was won.

And so when Jesus rose on Easter, all his appearances to Peter were simply meant to remind him again and again that his sins were absolutely forgiven. For Jesus spoke to him simply as one of his apostles and didn't say a word about his denial.

Except that in these verses Jesus does seem to use his thrice-repeated question to refer to Peter's thrice-repeated denial. Why does he do that? Jesus knew that Peter had repented of his sin. Jesus knew that Peter had received Jesus' forgiveness and that Peter did, in fact, love him very much. But the fact that Jesus repeats this question three times and then follows with a command indicates that Jesus wanted Peter to connect those things together. Jesus wanted Peter to go out and take care of his flock, his sheep and his lambs--and that would be a great way for him to show his love for Jesus. But Jesus wanted Peter to see that his service and his love *for* Jesus could never be separated from the love and forgiveness that Jesus gives. Every time Peter was to preach, teach, or baptize--every time he would feed God's flock--he was to remember how Jesus had so freely and fully forgiven him.

In many ways, we find ourselves in the same position as Peter, don't we? We are forgiven sinners. Perhaps our sins don't seem as bad as Peter's, then again, maybe they seem much worse. But that doesn't matter because Jesus has made it very clear that he has forgiven your sins. And the Easter season is all about reminding us that because Christ is risen, we can be assured that he no longer holds our sins against us.

So go ahead and put yourselves in Peter's shoes this morning and listen to these words of Jesus: Do you love me? And we respond, "Yes, Jesus, you know that we love you." Feed my sheep." Jesus also wants us to never separate the love and forgiveness he's won for us from the things we do for him. I think sometimes we're tempted to do that. If we come to church and hear of our forgiveness and our new life in Christ and then we go home or we go to work or go to school and continue just as we were before--we may have separated the two. If we say with our lips that we appreciate our Savior's love, and we appreciate this congregation because it's here that we have come to know his love, but then if we don't really feel like doing our part to support the work done here or we think that someone else will do it so I won't bother--then we're separating the two and we begin to think more about our sacrifice of time or money and less about Jesus' sacrifice for us.

No, Jesus sends out shepherds who are motivated by his forgiveness. He speaks to people just like you who have heard time and time again that you have been forgiven. He sends out those who see their own service as a response to his love and forgiveness. So even as Jesus sent out Peter, he is sending you--to care for his flock.

I think these words of Jesus wouldn't have made much sense to Peter or to us if they were all by themselves. **"Feed my lambs... Take care of my sheep"** But because we're familiar with the rest of Scripture we know that God often refers to his people as his sheep and himself as the shepherd. We know that from places like the 23rd Psalm where David writes, **"The Lord is my Shepherd."** Or those familiar words from John 10 where Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the Shepherd.

So even when he tells Peter to take care of and feed the flock, it's still Jesus' flock and Jesus is still caring for that flock, but he would now do it *through* Peter and the apostles. When Peter preached, Jesus cared for his sheep. When Peter and the other apostles spoke the Word of God and administered the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus fed his flock.

And Jesus continues to do that today whenever his Word is preached and the sacraments are used. Jesus is shepherding his people. But he also wants to do that through you – who have been moved by his forgiveness.

In this section Jesus uses different words each time he speaks to Peter. And if we'd look closely we'd see a slight distinction between *feed* to *take care of* and between *lambs* and *sheep*. But without getting into all the details, at the very least, we can certainly say that Jesus was concerned about all of his flock, including those who could be called lambs, that is, the youngest and the smallest sheep. The prophet Isaiah demonstrates that when he writes that the Lord **"tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those who have young."**

Jesus showed that he was concerned about the youngest members of his flock many times in his ministry. When his disciples tried to keep them away, Jesus said, **"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."** Jesus cared deeply for children because they were his lambs.

And now Jesus calls to you and says, "Feed my lambs." Parents have a special opportunity to feed Jesus' lambs when they bring their children to holy baptism and when they continue to teach their children at home and make use of other opportunities in the congregation (such as public worship) to strengthen the faith of their children.

But notice that Jesus didn't say, "Feed your lambs." Jesus was not only concerned that parents take care of their own children, but that all Christians see to the needs of all the flock, including its youngest members. In effect, Jesus says to you and me, "Feed my lambs, whether they are your children or not, whether you have children or not." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep," whether they are a part of your congregation or not. Whether they live in Modesto or California or the United States – or not.

Jesus said to feed his lambs and sheep – all of them. How are we going to do that? How can we possibly begin to do that?

In his grace, our Lord has allowed us to walk together with a group of Christians called a synod. And in that synod he allows us to take care of his flock, especially those whom we would not otherwise reach or even know. He has also allowed us to operate a system for training pastors and teachers. Those schools receive young men and women who, moved by Jesus' forgiveness for them, also desire to feed Jesus' flock. They desire to go to the places to which you cannot go. They want to share Jesus' love wherever they are sent and however they can serve.

But my friends, the desire of these young men and women won't get them into a classroom or into a pulpit. Recent years have seen education costs rise, and the funds allocated to worker

training especially on the college level have decreased dramatically. By God's grace we have the schools and by God's grace we have people willing to serve, but this system also needs people like you who want to care for God's flock.

But we're not walking this road alone. We're walking this road with thousands of other people who have been moved by Jesus' forgiveness to take care of his flock. But what will we do? Certainly we will do every thing in our power and ability to see to it that that work goes on here at St. Peter congregation. We'll support the work we do to reach out with the gospel into our community, to our children and to the children of others, all of whom are Jesus' lambs.

But we will also see to it that we do not fail to look outside of us, outside of our circumstances and situations. We'll see to it that we take care of all God's flock – even across the country or across the world.

In the end, Jesus will shepherd his flock. As small as it may seem, Jesus constantly tends his flock, guarding it from danger and feeding it with the word of his love. That's a beautiful picture. But he's looking for shepherds, people who have been moved by his forgiveness to care for his flock. He's looking for you. He says, "I've cared for you like a shepherd. Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep. Feed my sheep."