

Feed My Sheep
John 21:15-17
May 8, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

When Dave and I lived in Blacksburg, Virginia, we were members of a Presbyterian church. We both worked at Virginia Tech, and I served as the dean of students there. Probably because of my role at the university, our church nominated me to serve as their representative on the board of the Presbyterian Campus Ministry, which was named “Cooper House,” after the building that housed the program.

My very first meeting of the Cooper House board was a retreat. The campus ministry was not doing very well at attracting students back then. They averaged only six students a week – at a university of 27,000 students. Looking back, I can see that the purpose of the retreat was to decide whether to try to keep Cooper House going, or whether it was time to pull the plug. I didn’t understand that in the moment, of course. I was the newbie, the one just learning people’s names.

But then the campus minister made her report, including the low student attendance, and I found the courage to ask, “What are you feeding them?”

Everyone looked puzzled. Why would I ask that question?

“What are you feeding them?” I asked again. The campus minister answered, as though it were obvious, “Nothing.”

I said, “You should never expect college students to show up for anything unless you feed them. We will fix this.”

Thus began my role as the founder, on-going organizer, and often the cook for the Cooper House Feed the Flock program. There were four churches that were covenant partners with Cooper House. I recruited them to take turns providing a meal each week for the students. For more than a year, I made calls every week to remind the churches when it was their turn. I found volunteers to cover when a planned meal fell through in some way. And I was the cook myself at least once a month, sometimes with a partner and sometimes alone.

It worked! Within a few weeks, the average attendance rose from just six students to fifteen. By the end of the first year, attendance was at the capacity of the building – about thirty-five – and often students would sit on the floor in order to join in. Sometimes the meals had to be moved outdoors to accommodate everyone.

There was an annual chili cook-off, featuring chili prepared by both students and members of the covenant partner churches. On the night before exams, I would make pancakes for everyone. It was one of the most popular events each semester, with students crammed in to support one another, and to be fed.

I am so proud to tell you that the Feed the Flock program is still going strong, more than twenty years later. The students get what they need – food for their bodies and food for their souls. They go on mission trips together. A few of the students have felt a call to ministry through their experiences at Cooper House. And the four covenant partner churches have become even more deeply embedded in the work of the campus ministry.

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Today’s scripture passage comes from the very end of the Gospel of John, and it is all about building the church. It is set just a few days after the Cross and Easter. Some of the disciples have been fishing all night, but caught no fish. When they return to shore, there is Jesus, standing on the beach. He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and suddenly they have so many fish in their nets that they can’t haul them in.

When Jesus called his disciples, he promised to make them fishers of people. Here Jesus is telling them that if they aren’t being successful in finding new believers in the same ways that have worked before, they should try something new. Cast their nets on the OTHER side of the boat.

Then Jesus prepares a breakfast for them of grilled fish and bread. He FEEDS his disciples, who must be hungry after a long night of work. Jesus is showing them how to care for one another. And how to grow the church that will come after him.

After breakfast, Jesus takes a walk down the beach with Simon Peter. This is Simon, renamed Peter, because he was the rock on whom Jesus would build his church. And Peter, who just a few days ago has denied Jesus three times as Jesus was being tried and then tortured. So far as we know, this is the first one-on-one conversation between Jesus and Peter after that personal betrayal.

And Jesus says simply, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” That is, do you love me more than these other disciples do? How can Peter possibly answer that question? The last time he made a promise to Jesus he broke it. He denied knowing Jesus in the very moment when it mattered most. What can he say now?

“Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

And Jesus says, “Then feed my lambs.”

But again, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Simon,” he says, not “Peter.” Does Jesus still think of him as the Rock on which he will build his church? This has to worry Peter. What is coming next?

“Yes Lord; you know that I love you.”

And Jesus says, “Tend my sheep.”

Peter is confused. What is his relationship with Jesus now, now that he has betrayed him, now that Jesus is risen from the dead?

A third time Jesus asks Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” The gospel says that Peter feels hurt because Jesus asks him this question three times.

Finally, Peter says, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Peter realizes that Jesus knows him through and through. He knows Peter’s love for him as well as he knew Peter’s cowardice and betrayal before. Jesus is calling Peter out of the memory of that awful night and into a new day, focused on love and service.

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus says. That’s all. If you love me, feed my sheep. You don’t need to worry about the past. It is gone. The church I will build through you is not about you. It is about my flock. Take care of them. Do the work for which I have called you. Feed my sheep.

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At that first Cooper House board retreat so many years ago, the campus minister had said, “We don’t know why students aren’t interested in coming,” something many churches would say about themselves. We don’t know why people don’t come.

The answer is the one that Jesus gave to Peter in today’s scripture: “Feed my sheep.”

I take this instruction literally as well as metaphorically. I believe we are called to feed the hungry people around us, body AND soul. That is why I am so pleased with this church’s mission activities, which are so often focused on feeding our neighbors. We donate food and money to the local food pantries. In the fall, we sponsor a team for the CROP Hunger Walk. Several of our regular mission offerings support those who are hungry in one way or another. Every Tuesday evening, the soup kitchen uses our space to prepare and distribute food. And four times a year, we do all the cooking and delivery ourselves. We are known in our community for this, and I know of at least one member who joined specifically because we are engaged in this work.

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus said. Just that. “Feed my sheep.” It is the way to get college students to show up for any event, and it is the way to grow a church.

There is so much in the Bible that is difficult to understand. This command is not, and it is something we can do successfully. Feed hungry people. Full stop. Thanks be to God for clear instructions.

Amen