

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“Feed My Sheep”

Scripture Lesson: John 21: 15-19

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, March 9, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 21: 15-19

Jesus and Peter

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” 16 A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” 17 He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. 18 Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” 19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

Feed My Sheep

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

A funny and fictitious story is told of a man who had a goldfish that he loved dearly. Every morning, he'd walk by the fishbowl, tap the glass, and say, “Good morning, Swim Shady!”

But one day, he noticed something strange — his fish, Swim Shady, was acting frantic, darting around and gasping at the surface of the water. Concerned, the man did what any good pet owner would do: he turned to the internet.

After extensive research, he found the answer — Swim Shady was thirsty! He needed fresh water! So the man ran to the kitchen, grabbed a tiny cup, and carefully poured water over Swim Shady's head. Nothing changed. In fact, Swim Shady looked even more distressed.

Frustrated, the man called his veterinarian, who, after a long pause, said, “Sir... your fish isn't thirsty. He's surrounded by water! But if the water is bad, he can't breathe properly. You don't need to pour water on him — you need to change the water in which he's living.”

On this first Sunday of Lent, I want us to imagine for a moment that our space on this terrestrial ball is a kind of fishbowl.

And in our bowl, as it were — be it our lovely and Holy City or from wherever you may be tuning in — we tend to have access to a great many things.

We have resources, and knowledge, and opportunities. We've got some nice, well-placed greenery, not to mention a good relationship with friends like Nemo and Dory and perhaps a few other fish.

Sadly, however, and oftentimes unbeknownst to us, our colorful aquarium décor can begin to function like a modern-day Tower of Babel.

The accents we place in our lives become for us structures of independence and personal achievement. What begins to happen is that we become isolated unto ourselves, and the water around us becomes stagnant.

We may swim around thinking that we have everything we need. We may even be successful or responsible. We might be leaders in our community. Yet all the while, we find ourselves gasping for air.

If we are going to have a chance at fixing our problem over the long haul, we need to understand that it is not going to happen using the same resources that have always been around us. We're certainly not able to make any eternal changes to our lives on our own.

In other words, we don't need more of the same kind of water in which we've been swimming. We need something different — something more. What we need is new and fresh water. What we need is living water.

Jesus talked about such water when he met a woman from Samaria at a well, and Jesus asked her for a drink.

Now, because Jews didn't ordinarily share things in common with Samaritans, the woman was surprised and questioned him. But Jesus answered her, saying, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

Then, as if pointing to the well, Jesus went on to say, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."

One of the lessons I glean from that story is that the same old water just won't cut it — at least not in the kind of enduring way that Jesus was talking about.

In Reformed theological circles, we often refer to that kind of water as grace. It turns out that only God's grace can satisfy our thirst for righteousness and that longing in our hearts for true communion with God.

This is part of what Jesus was trying to teach us about grace when he said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Each Sunday from now until Easter, we will highlight some of the final words that Jesus spoke whilst on the cross. This morning, we consider briefly those particular words of his: "I am thirsty."

When Jesus was hanging on the cross and chose to say, "I am thirsty," he wasn't simply expressing the fact that he was parched. He was thirsty, yes — but there was also present in Jesus' human nature a thirst that went far deeper than his physical pain. His was a thirst that could only be satisfied with grace.

Grace is a familiar word to us. We sing about it as being "amazing." After all, that is what saved a wretch like John Newton — that former slave trader — who declared that grace is what taught his heart to fear and grace his fears relieved.

Still, we don't easily yield to the sufficiency of grace, do we? In fact, we don't naturally gravitate to much of anything that is so out of our control.

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning, we read about the Tower of Babel. In that story, the people of God decided to build a tower to make a name for themselves.

In doing so, they not only neglected God's provision, but they effectively chose to rely on themselves — on their accomplishments and ingenuity. They chose to rely on what they thought was best. As a result, instead of happiness and collaboration, what they were left with was heartache and confusion.

Throughout the Season of Lent, we will be reminded of the stark contrast that exists between the towers of our self-sufficiency on the one hand, and the cross of God's love and self-sacrifice on the other.

If that is the grace that we have received, should that not also be the grace that we share?

After his resurrection, in this morning's New Testament Lesson, Jesus meets up with the disciple Peter. Three times he asks if Peter loves him, and three times he basically tells Peter to "Feed my sheep."

This has led students of the Bible to speculate as to why Jesus asked Peter the same question and essentially provided the same answer three times.

Was he trying to give Peter a difficult time — the third degree, as it were? Was this part of the Scriptures' literary design, like in Isaiah, where on beholding the majesty of God he declared three times: "Holy, Holy, Holy"? Or did Peter, having said "I love you" three times, and Jesus having told him to feed and tend his flock three times — was that a way to draw our attention back to the fact that Peter had previously denied Jesus three times?

While there may remain some speculation about the exchange between Jesus and Peter, what we do know is that the sheep about which Jesus speaks belong to him, and Peter's task is to feed them. But feed them what?

Heaven forbid we take the religiosity that is out there in the world today — like the idea that God's unconditional love does not also require repentance — and pour it over the people of God and call it grace.

Jesus was like new wine in old wineskins. It was expanding, and the existing paradigms were bursting at the seams. As for the disciple Peter, he wasn't called to do what he had always done. His was certainly not the task of pouring the same old water on God's children.

No — Peter was called, by God's grace, to change the water in which they lived. And so are we.

This morning, we set apart for service our friend and Associate Pastor for Christian Education and Congregational Life, the Rev. Dr. Peter Sutton.

And I dare say that in Peter's special and sacred work, he is not unlike all of us, in that we too take our lead from our Good Shepherd.

In Jesus Christ our Lord, we learn that Christian education is not simply about sharing knowledge. It is about feeding hearts and minds with the whole counsel of God.

And congregational life — it's not just a matter of talking about our union in Christ and the fellowship we should enjoy. It is about tending the flock and creating space for care, belonging, and growth.

To that point, Dr. Peter Sutton is not here to help us maintain our spiritual maturity. He is here to help us grow and mature as faithful followers of Jesus.

He is not here to serve as an aqueduct of the water the world provides. He is called — as we all are — to be a vessel of the Word, and grace, and love that only God can provide.

When this world leaves us gasping for air, when we find ourselves thirsty for a water that satisfies our spirits and hungry for a food that nourishes our souls, we need look no further than Jesus Christ — the one who didn't run when his sheep were vulnerable unto death, but rather gave his life so that we would live.

"Feed my sheep," Jesus says to us. And in that singular commission, we find meaning and purpose in our life and in our life together.

During this Lenten season, and in all seasons, we are called to be agents of change and transformation. This way of life and living is not based upon the towers we build, but solely upon the complete work of God on the cross.

At the end of the day, only God provides the Bread of Heaven. God alone provides for us and for the world Living Water.

Our task, as those who drink deeply from the well of grace, is to be the kind of community of faith that makes it easier for others to drink of it, so that they too will come to know what we have come to know:

That "grace has brought [us] safe thus far, and grace will lead [us] home."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.