

“Contributing Our Chapters to the Never-ending Story”

John 21:15-17, 20-25

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How many of you remember the television series, *The Twilight Zone*? It ran from 1959 to 1964. It was a futuristic series that usually had a weird twist at the end with a pointed message. Re-runs ran for years. I only watched one episode, but I remember it clearly! There was an anti-social man, with thick black-rimmed glasses who was obsessed with reading. The episode portrayed all the ways he hated humanity, and loved books. In the weird twist at the end, all of humankind, except him, is destroyed in a catastrophic event. In the last scene, he is running, overjoyed, up the steps to a huge library which he'll have all to himself. He trips. His glasses fall off his face. And before he can slow down, he steps on them, breaking the glass. The camera blurs the scene to reflect what the man can see...only shapes and colors. The last shot is of him holding the frame of his glasses in his hands...sobbing.

This love of books is to the extreme but most of us love stories, if not...books. There is a delightful children's story made into a movie in the 1980's called The Never Ending Story. In it a boy who is being bullied by his classmates seeks to escape his world by reading books. A book dealer tells him of an incredible book but warns him that it's more than a story; that the reader literally gets pulled into the story...the reader becomes a part of the story. The book dealer refuses to sell the boy the book because it's so dangerous but the boy steals the book and enters an adventure of a lifetime...being incorporated into the story just as he had been warned. This [hold up the Bible] is the Good Book, the Best Book, the never ending story because throughout the centuries each one of us in our own generation gets pulled into the story...being warned that it could change our lives, we are invited to contribute our own chapters, but in order to do that we have to study the chapters already written.

With that in mind, let's study the last chapter of John or more specifically, the last half of the last chapter of John. The focus is on Peter. Some have said it's the restoration of Peter as a disciple after his three-fold denial of Christ before Christ's crucifixion. The three questions each reversing one of the denials. Others have said; it's Peter's commissioning as head of the newly forming Christian church. Catholics would use this as another affirmation of apostolic succession of the Pope. Others have pointed out this is simply the Near Eastern custom that something important has to be repeated three times before witnesses to be solemnized. Still others have said; that it's another example of Jesus' tremendous forgiveness or simply said, Jesus didn't abide by “the three strikes you're out rule.” Let's look at it.

The risen Christ had appeared to Peter and the disciples at least twice. Like many people, after a powerful, spiritual experience, when that experience begins to fade, we go back to life as usual. Peter went back fishing. Jesus had already called Peter once to fish for people...but for reasons only Peter knew, he went back to fishing for fish. Jesus confronts him in a way that would make most anyone uncomfortable. This conversation between Jesus and Peter has been dissected most every time it comes up in our lectionary reading...but it's so valuable. For in the English translations, the Greek meaning of four words cannot be communicated, and they do make a difference!

The conversation goes like this: Jesus asks Peter... “Do you love me more than these?” Or more literally, “are you loving me more than these” The Greek word for love that Jesus uses is a form of *agapé* ~ godly, holy love. And what are the “these;” the fish? The boats? The life of

a fisherman? The other disciples? It's not clear. But Peter answers; "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you?" However, in the Greek, Peter uses a different word for love, a form of *philio*; human love. So literally, the translation would be, "Yes, Lord, you have perceived that I am fond of you." Jesus then commands him, "Feed my lambs." Notice that Jesus used the word for lambs, the young sheep. And the word for feed here is a form of grazing. Literally, "be you grazing the lambs of me."

Then Jesus, using the same word for love that he used before asks Peter again. "Do you love me? Do you love me with a godly, holy love?" Peter responds with the same word he used before for love, "you know that I am fond of you." Jesus commands him, "Tend my sheep." Now the word for tend used here literally means, "guard and guide, shepherd," so Jesus is saying, "guard and guide my sheep...shepherd them." Finally, Jesus asks a third time, this time meeting Peter where he was, using the word for love that Peter insisted on using, a form of *philio*, "Peter, are you fond me?" Now Peter's hurt being asked three times, but says, "Lord, you know everything, you know that I am fond of you." Then Jesus commands, "Feed my sheep." Going back to the word for graze, but instead of just the lambs, it's also the mature sheep, that Peter is commanded to let graze. Then Peter does what most of us do in similar situations, Peter tries to take the attention off himself and says, "hey, what about John!" Jesus does what Jesus always did when the disciples tried to compare themselves to each other, Jesus rejects the rivalry between the disciples, Jesus says, my paraphrase, "that's none of your business...you worry about you!"

So that's what happened in the second half of the last chapter of John, what does it say to our chapter of the never ending story? Each of us have or will have spiritual experiences of some kind and as those experiences fade we will return to life as "usual" just like Peter. But someday, someday, Christ will confront us...asking us the question. Do you love me with a holy love? Or you fulfilling the great commandments to love God and love others as you love yourself? Or perhaps, meeting us where we are... "are you fond me?" Then as we are called into that love relationship, we are given three responsibilities to living in love. This week we are going to look at the first and third, next week we will look at the second. First, we are to care for the young in faith...the lambs and that doesn't mean just children! We are to let the young in faith, graze in and through the chapters of the Good Book, digesting what they can. Second, we are to guard and guide the mature in faith, as well as the maturing, shepherding others toward the Good Shepherd. In next week's sermon, we will focus on this responsibility to living in love, that of guarding and guiding. And third, we are to open the pages of the never ending story for the mature in faith to question, doubt, dig deeper, and experience the adventure.

Our adventures will be different, just as each of the disciples' adventures was different. Peter's was different than John's. John's was different than James'. And we know very little about the others, Matthew, Andrew, Thomas, and we know even less about Thaddeus or Bartholomew. Each one of them wrote their own chapter in the never ending story. Just like each one of us are to do.

This second half of the last chapter of John's gospel is one of the reasons I committed my life to ministry. In high school, in a worship service, I heard this text, followed by a song, that said, speaking as from God; "tell the people I love them, tell the people I care, when they feel far away from me tell the people, I'm there." Like many people, as a part of my adventure I have found that simplistic message of love gets extremely complicated. "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." Direct as that is, I have found myself praying, "God, they're all on different diets!"

Just as we are aware of the dangers of not paying attention to peanut allergies or those on a gluten free diet or those who are diabetic, as a congregation, we are to be aware of the dangers of not being sensitive to the spiritual diets of those in our same flock. There are some in our congregation that want a steady diet of the social gospel; prophetic preaching on political issues. They quote people who say that those churches that aren't preaching the social gospel weekly should be ashamed of themselves. There are others who can't stomach that diet. They are sickened by politics in worship. For them, worship is for worshipping God.

There are some who want to feast on missions. There are others who are nourished by the focus on the life of the congregation. There are some who only want a double helping of dessert: joy and enthusiasm. There are others who need the comfort food diet of compassion and care. And there are others who want the meat and potatoes of challenge and confrontation. There are some who get steamed if we focus too much on stewardship just as a child doesn't always like to eat their vegetables. There are lambs in our congregation, young and old. Those new to the faith or those exploring what it might mean to be a person of faith. Do you ever wonder why some people get more out of the children's time than the adult sermon? I've had people tell me, "Lin, don't give me all that theological stuff...just tell me how to live the faith when I've lost my job or my marriage is falling apart or my parent is dying." And there are others who are academically motivated who say, "Lin, give me the rich diet of the theologians of the past and present...let me feast on their wisdom and insights."

These are just some of the different diets that are present in our congregation. Our collective and collaborative feeding the lambs and feeding the sheep means for us, the tending of the tensions between those on different diets! For most, if not all of us, having a balanced diet is healthiest. Would you force feed an infant a steak? Would deny a steak to a mature adult? Covenant is tending this tension...for a healthy, balanced spiritual diet! A wise theologian, Parker Palmer, who is also a national consultant for church growth once said to a church who described themselves as a "homogeneous congregation that wanted to diversify," Palmer said to them, "Until you can recognize, respect, and manage your own diversity currently present, you are not ready to open up to others." In my words...we recognize and tend the tensions. Do you know the spiritual diets others are on? Do you feel that your diet is really the only diet...the right diet? Do you feed others what you want to eat or do you allow a potluck, exposing yourself to their diet, offering in love, what nourishes you? If we dine with people who only eat what we eat, if we surround ourselves with people who only think like us, believe like us, if we try to force feed others to eat the diet that nourishes us...we will miss the richness of the banquet table Christ has set. Is it hard? Yes. Is it worth it, absolutely! This is our chapter...tending the tension: a unique chapter that I don't see being written by a lot of other churches, Protestant, Catholic, fundamentalist or liberal. A challenging chapter, a chapter I believe others could read, and we will re-read, as a witness to the glory of God, and the faithfulness of a mainline flock!

This is the Good Book; its story is wonderful, powerful, and yes, dangerous! We can't read it, really read it, without being incorporated into its adventure. In the last chapter of John's gospel, we are told this, "...there are also many other things that Jesus did; if everyone of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." So true, but the world, we, have received this book, and are invited to add our chapters, together and individually, to the never ending story of God's love! Amen!