

## FEED MY SHEEP

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Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

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### John 21.15-17

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So I was in Wal-Mart the other day renewing my prescriptions and while I was waiting, I happened into the greeting card section; and these were actual Valentine cards I saw:

A picture of Charles Darwin on front, inside – "I select you ... naturally."

Quirky, kind of sad – a showering of purple hearts on a pink background, "I tolerate you!" I thought, "Who would I want to give this one to?"

More contemporary, really true love: "I love you enough to give you my Netflix password."

I get this one: "A grandparent's Valentine – Spoil 'em rotten, send 'em back to you."

This one's kind of cold – "I was going to bring you a gift of candy, but I didn't think you needed it this year."

This one, too: Hearts on the front: "Just for you", you open it, there's a small package inside, "Read into this gift of Febreze whatever you'd like"

This one's just cynical – "Thank you for your unsolicited donation to Hallmark"

Here's a racy one: "There's no one I'd rather lie in bed and look at my phone next to."

Even racier: "Let's get it on" – on the inside, "So we can watch couple more episodes before we fall asleep." "I love you less than my dog but still a whole lot."

A living room, a soccer ball, a broken lamp, a little boy looking at his mom, "Unconditional love is a beautiful thing"

Silly!

It's been almost exactly four years since I had a heart attack, and since then, with some fits and starts, I've tried to pay close attention to matters of the heart – delicate, fragile, yet amazingly resilient and strong. And I've had to make a lifestyle change, reading the sides of food packages when I shop, buying fresh fruit and vegetables, eating better (at least trying!). But I've also been asking myself about the kind of life changes that my heart needs if I am to be a better man, the man Christ wants me to be, because I know my life does depend on it.

But the fact remains – if I'm honest – sometimes I grow complacent, take my health, take things, take people for granted. And so for the last four years – frankly, especially in the last year and a half – I've been confronted on many levels with the question, "What does the heart require?" What does it require for my physical well-being, but even more, at this stage in my life, what does it require with those nearest and dearest to me, also with the stranger far away? What blocks my heart? And what will feed it, oxygenate it, cause it to pump the fullness of life through it? What does the heart require? That's what I want to talk about this morning.

Three points, then a final story. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks his friends. "Feed my sheep." So simple. So hard.

**ONE.** The first thing I want to say is that Jesus does not restrict his message to himself. The message of Jesus is not restricted to Jesus. He does not point to himself; he points beyond himself to the greater Truth. John points to Jesus and Jesus points to something beyond him. Matthew, Mark, and Luke call it the inbreaking rule of God; John calls it, very simply, "God is Love." Where Love is, God is. One of the greatest mistakes in the history of the church, and still today even in progressive churches – we place restrictions on Jesus' message that Jesus himself did not place. We betray the universality of the Gospel when we limit it to Jesus. Theologically speaking, John's resurrected and ascended Christ of the Cosmos is bigger than the historical Jesus.

As Christians we find the embodiment of the Love of God in Jesus the most complete expression of such Love. But there are others, too, complete and beautiful in themselves – the world’s great spiritual traditions, among scientists and poets and artists and others. The sun is not Christian, the birds are not Hindu, nature has no religion. No difference, the love of a Buddhist mother, a Muslim mother, an atheist mother, too. Wherever Love is, God is, whether or not they speak the name of Jesus. Christians have no monopoly on the Love of God.

But we do have an important role – Jesus says, “Feed”; “Tend,” which means, in our diverse America, wherever and in whoever we see such love, support it, multiply it so that, as Jesus also says, “the world might have life and have it abundantly.” If we want the Gospel to speak to our kids and our grandkids, and their kids, too, we need to discern the sacred threads that course through the rich tapestry that is our world, and then feed it, tend it.

**TWO.** Most of us seek the love we want but are not prepared to give. Again: We seek the love we want but are not prepared to give. Love has its own designs, it can’t be programmed, controlled; it seeks its own way. We must be prepared to give the love we seek, to give the love we seek. I’ve learned we don’t reason ourselves into growth; changed behavior changes hearts which in turn, then, changes minds. We act our way into maturity.

Most Christians – and sadly, progressive folks like us, too – most people have just enough religion to keep the rules, but not enough to confront unjust rules. Just enough religion to wield power but not enough to be vulnerable and allow people in to love them. Just enough religion to play it safe, color inside the lines, think inside the box, but not enough to soar, to dream impossible dreams, to live with joy. We have just enough religion to be a Christian, but not enough to be Christ.

Once a disciple told his master he was so bitter, he wasn’t able to love anything, anyone anymore. The master asked him, “Why can’t you love?” “I’m afraid.” “What are you afraid of?” He said, “Love.” If you’re a parent, there comes a time you have to let your children go (and we learn the bittersweet lesson, don’t we, that they were never really, fully ours anyway, but their own persons); we love watching them blossom, realize their dreams, achieve what we always wanted for them, but we don’t ever really let go, not really. Holding on, letting go, holding on, letting go – for a lifetime. That’s how love it, isn’t it? Two thousand years ago, and again and again and again throughout our lives, love comes to us in the flesh – a spouse, a child, a friend, who knows the face of love – stands in the doorway between heaven and earth, yet we’re afraid – loss of control, risk, vulnerable. Afraid of love. Yet our faith teaches in Jesus we see Love at its most vulnerable, and also at its strongest.

**THREE.** “Do you love me? Tend my sheep.” The test of loving is tending; love is not the feeling of love but an intentional deciding, a conscious choosing, committed to what is good and right for another. Notice: Jesus does not ask, “Do you love them?” He asks, “Do you love me?” Martin Luther King called agape “disinterested love,” meaning a love not based on the worthiness or unworthiness of the one you love. Jesus’ love wants the best for someone else even if it’s not the best for you, even if they don’t deserve it, because in the end, what’s best for them will become the best for you, because it’s the best for them, because it changes you both.

This past Tuesday, once again, the Indiana state legislature, from the *Indianapolis Star*, “pulled the plug on a hate crimes bill, leaving Indiana as one of only five states without such a law.” It’s no secret this is a bone thrown to the Religious Right who don’t want to extend legal protection to LGBTQ fellow Indiana citizens. Then Tuesday night, the President’s *State of the Union* speech, in which he asked for more military spending, wants to add to our nuclear arsenal, touted non-existent “beautiful clean coal,” and blamed immigrants for gang violence.

However, the most repulsive part of the speech was when he repudiated DREAM-ers, immigrants who came with their families as children and have lived in America ever since, many for decades. “Americans are dreamers, too,” he said. Forget just for a moment the praise he received from the Alt-Right’s Richard Spencer and the KKK’s David Duke. And forget just for a moment that this pits folks who’ve lived productive lives here for many years with “Americans,” a not-so-subtle dog-whistle to white nationalism. What I found so egregious – there was so much pious talk of family and faith and flag, but the flag draped only around one kind of faith, one kind of family – violating Christian values and American ideals.

“Do you love me?” Jesus says. “Look after ... Take care of ... Cultivate ... Minister to ... Tend ... my sheep.”

One final story. Let me set the stage: About a month ago, Mary and I got a rescue dog from the Fort Wayne SPCA, a five-year-old golden retriever, Isabella, “Izzy.” I’m also part of a men’s breakfast with a dozen other guys – Ron Caldwell, Pat Hurley, Todd Stephenson, Terry Dougherty, and others – none of us knew everyone, so it’s been very rich for us sharing with each other. We’ve been meeting for a few months, and two Thursdays ago, we were discussing mindfulness – one man shared how it had helped his older sister, now deceased, as a teenager suffering from a severe form of epilepsy; another how concentrating on his breathing calmed him the previous week when he was having chest pains; and a third shared his history of depression throughout his adult life, even contemplating suicide, how it had brought him relief and release. It was a powerful morning.

I left and began my errands when I got a phone call; it was Ron, “Where are you?” “I’m at Wal-Mart.” “I’ll be right over, I have something for you.” So I met Ron in the Fire Lane in front of the Jefferson Pointe Wal-Mart. He kept the car running, I opened the passenger door, he said, “I was with Janie [Jane works at the Orchard Gallery, a wonderful place where local artists display and sell their art]. . . . I was with Janie, she saw this and said, ‘Shall we get this for the Spaths?’ and I said, ‘Yes,!’ so here it is.” I opened the bag, unwrapped the paper, and there it was, a bright and beautiful painting of a golden-haired dog, and next to his head, on one side, a multi-colored beachball, and on the other, these words, “Lost. Found. Loved!” I love the painting and I loved that they thought of us, and it looks beautiful in our home.

As Ron drove away and I went back in to get my prescription, I thought how appropriate it was not only because it was such a thoughtful dog-warming gift, but that “Lost. Found. Loved!” was the perfect way to describe the three men and their stories from just a little while before. And I thought back over my own life, the times I lost myself, lost my way, and was found, because someone cared, when I was given a second chance, when I was tended, when I all alone and needed, and I was tended to – tended – and fed, and deeply, unconditionally loved. “Lost. Found. Loved.” So I guess I’m wondering if it might not be the perfect way to describe you, too.

The tend-er becomes the tended. The feed-er becomes the fed. And the one who loves, in the end, becomes the deeply loved. That’s how it works.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asked. “Tend, Feed my sheep.”

### **CLOSING BLESSING – Psalm 23**

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters.  
He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.  
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;  
for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;  
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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Location – Sea of Galilee, eating breakfast with disciples, 3<sup>rd</sup> post-resurrection appearance

In John, the last conversation between Jesus and his disciples. What would you want to say if it was your last conversation with those you love, with your friends?

The first two times, "Simon, do you love (agape) me?" Simon, "You know I love (phileo) you."

The third time, "Simon, do you love (phileo) me?" Simon, "You know I love (phileo) you."

Sheep – dirty, dependent, need to be led, lost alone, wander off

Shepherd – Bedouin, dirty job, lower social rung – YET responsibility, the shepherd loves the sheep, the shepherd lays down his life for his sheep

From Plautus, *Asinaria* (~200 BCE), the old Latin saying, "*Homo homini lupus*" – "We are wolves to each other." Also, "Practice what you preach."

Three times – to make up for the three-fold denial

"Pasture the lambs"      "Tend the sheep"      "Pasture the sheep"

PETER'S PROGRESSION – Fisherman → Fisher of people → Keeper of the keys → now Shepherd

If we look at things through Peter's eyes, we see a problem. If we look through Jesus' eyes, he sees there's enough. The problem is not the amount of resources, the problem is the allocation of resources. How do we tend? How do we feed?