Do You Love Me, Feed My Sheep

John 21:1-25

Key Verse: 21:15 “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Someone said that a relationship is like an extended rubber band that once it is broken, it is very difficult to restore back to the original condition. It may be even the same between a father and a son. In the Bible, King David was known as a man after God’s own heart. He was a good shepherd and a compassionate and righteous king of Israel. Still, he didn’t forgive his son Absalom, who had killed his half brother Amnon, who had raped Absalom’s sister Tamar. (2 Sa 13) David didn’t see Absalom for three years. Michael Reagan, the first son of Ronald Reagan, the 40th President of the United States, was a trouble maker when he was young. His famous father Ronald Reagan didn’t see him for a long time. Ronald Reagan was invited as an honorary speaker for the commencement ceremony at Michael’s school. But Reagan didn’t recognize Michael at the ceremony. Later Michael said, “My father loved the whole world, but he didn’t love his own son.” I don’t mean to dishonor the president. I respect President Reagan as one of the greatest presidents of America, and he is a devoted Christian. I mean to say that restoring broken relationships is really difficult regardless of human situation.

In today’s passage the Risen Jesus visits his disciples and restores their broken relationship. Jesus especially focuses on one person, Simon Peter, who disowned him three times. The author of this book is John the Apostle. His book was supposed to end by chapter 20, but he added one more chapter as epilogue for the sake of Peter. John wrote this gospel in AD 85 long after Peter had been martyred in Rome in AD 64. Commemorating his colleague Peter, John wrote this epilogue to testify how Jesus visited Peter and restored their relationship. Through this passage we also learn about the nature of God’s unchanging love for sinners.

First, friends, haven’t you any fish? (1-6) After Jesus rose again from the dead, he appeared to his disciples at least three times. The first time, he appeared to them on the night of his resurrection while they were all together in a room. A week later he appeared again while Thomas was with them. This was the third time. (14) Jesus met them at the Sea of Galilee, where his seven disciples were fishing. (1) They followed Simon Peter who said, “I am going out to fish.” The others said, “We’ll go with you.” They went out and worked hard all night, but they caught nothing. (3) They despaired. They were tired and hungry. What made them really unhappy was their sense of failure, not only as fishermen, but also as Jesus’ disciples. Even though the Risen Jesus visited them twice and encouraged them to have peace, they continued to have guilt and shame in their hearts. Except for John, all the others ran away when Jesus was arrested and crucified. Among them, Peter denied Jesus three times before a little girl. They thought that they were losers as fishermen and as disciples. The sense of failure dragged their hearts to the bottom of the deep Sea of Galilee in the dark night.

This gloomy picture of the disciples reminds us of the empty and meaningless life without God. In Ernest Hemingway’s novel “*The Old man and the Sea*” an old fisherman Santiago fought against a huge fish in the middle of the sea as a matter of life and death. After he won the struggle, he tied it up at the stern of his boat to carry it home. But when he arrived at the shore, the huge fish remained only as a skeleton, because on the way it had been eaten by other fishes. The old fisherman cried out over his empty struggle. People say that this despairing old man was the self-portrait of Hemingway. Hemingway won the Nobel Prize and reached to the peak of success. But later he killed himself because of the emptiness of his life.

After Jesus died on the cross, his disciples went back to their former life as fishermen. They had to make a living. They worked hard all night, but caught nothing. They pulled out only empty nets from the darkness of the sea. Have you ever experienced despair and emptiness, feeling like a loser as a Christian and as a student, a worker, or a friend? Have you ever thought that everything was over and that there was no way out for your problem? The moment you think that everything is over is the moment God can work. The moment you think that you are alone is the moment that God is with you. There is no despair and failure in Jesus Christ because he is always with us and takes care of us, especially when we hit bottom.

Look at verses 4-6. “***Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish***.” Jesus visited them, but they did not recognize him. It was still too dark for them to recognize Jesus. They did not expect someone to be hanging around the shore early in the early morning. They did not realize it was Jesus because their despair blinded them not to see Jesus. In the same way, if we are too absorbed by our problem, our spiritual eyes become blind so that we can’t realize God’s presence in our life. Jesus called them, “Friends.” Calling those who betrayed us ‘friends’ is not easy. But Jesus called them ‘friends’ as if nothing had happened between them. Jesus loved them the same yesterday, today, and forever more. (Heb 13:8) He asked them, “*Haven’t you any fish*?” They answered, “No.” Sometimes God asks the same question to those who left him to find their own life, like a prodigal son. The prodigal son left his father and went to a far distant country and squandered his life there. He seemed to enjoy unlimited freedom. But soon he became homeless in the distant country and collapsed with hunger to the floor of a pig pen. He must have heard his father’s gentle voice, “Son, haven’t you any freedom?” “*Friend, haven’t you any fish*?” is God’s existential questions to all human beings who have sought answers and solutions for their utopia. Some never want to admit their mistakes or say ‘no’, even though they continue to repeat pulling out their empty nets from the deep sea of humanism. But Jesus’ disciples were honest and humble. They said, “No”. They meant that they had worked hard all night by themselves, but caught nothing. “Please help us if you can!” They didn’t recognize Jesus, but they were honest before God and humble for Jesus’ mercy.

Jesus told them to throw their net on the right side of the boat. It was not easy for the disciples to obey the stranger’s advice. In fact, they worked all night and tried all possible places to catch fish based on their experience. But they humbly obeyed Jesus’ words. When they obeyed Jesus’ words, what happened? They caught lots of fish. They could not even haul the net into the boat because of the large number of fish. A miracle happened when they obeyed Jesus’ word. We’ll experience one miracle after another when we obey Jesus’ words. In fact, Jesus is willing to perform miracles for us, but we are not ready to receive them because of our unbelief and doubt. Unbelief is disaster!

Jesus came to this world with two purposes: He came to save us from our sins, and he came to restore Adam’s failure. Jesus fulfilled two purposes through his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. Jesus visited his disciples to restore their failure. Jesus restored their failure by letting them catch lots of fish. Jesus restores our failure by letting us become successful and fruitful as students, career workers, missionaries, parents, children, and so on. Jesus restored Adam’s failure through his obedience on the cross and restored our failure through his unchanging love. Jesus did not abandon his disciples. He came back to see them. He came to restore their failure. He came to them first. We call this Jesus’ initiative love. 1 John 4:19 says, “*We love, because he first loved us*.” We sinned against God and became enemies of God. We didn’t come to God first, but God came to us first. He sent his Son Jesus Christ first and let him die for us while we were still sinners. (Ro 5:8) We must be honest before God and respond to his initiative love, “*Friends, haven’t you any fish*?” How do you answer him?

Second, come and have breakfast. (7-14) Look at verses 7-13. “***Then the disciples whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of a large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.***” Peter’s abrupt reaction always makes us laugh. Still, his abrupt behavior revealed his unceasing affection and loyalty for Jesus. He jumped into the water when John told him that it was Jesus. Peter’s reaction showed us that he was always thinking about Jesus and was waiting for his return. Jesus welcomed Peter not only with words, but also with food. Like a loving mother, Jesus cooked a breakfast for the hungry disciples. The disciples couldn’t say anything to Jesus because they thought that they didn’t deserve Jesus’ love. But Jesus invited them saying, “*Come and have breakfast*.” He is like a loving mother who bears her children’s mistakes and invites them to a breakfast table.

“*Come and have breakfast*” shows God’s unchanging and unconditional love for sinners. Men have sinned against God since human history started. They provoked God to anger whatever they did. But our God is patient and merciful. He have borne our sins and invited us to his kingdom. Jesus has always invited sinners. “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” (Mt 11:28) “*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink*…” (Jn 7:37) “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*” (Jn 8:12) “*Come and have breakfast*” (Jn 21:12) Today Jesus invites us, too. He invites us to the breakfast which he provided. He invites us to come to him to drink the living water. He asks us to come to him to have rest for our souls. Jesus wants us to come as we are. We don’t have to disguise ourselves to be holy or righteous. He knows that we are not perfect. He knows that we need him. He is ready to welcome us. He is willing to forgive us our sins. He calls us and invites us every day. *Come and have breakfast*!

Third, do you love me? Feed my sheep (15-25) The beach party with Jesus was so beautiful. The disciples were moved by Jesus’ forgiving love. They couldn’t finish the meal properly because they were too excited being with Jesus. Peter must have had a breakfast with many tears, tears of joy and thanks. When they had finished eating, Jesus came to Peter and asked him some personal questions. Look at verse 15. “***When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs***.” Jesus could have asked him other questions: “Why did you disown me three times at that time?” “How has your mother-in-law been doing?” “How was the breakfast?” But Jesus asked him, “*Do you love me*?” Jesus asked Peter with the same question, “Do you love me?” three times. Why? It was because Jesus wanted to restore Peter’s failure through his love confession. Even though Peter enjoyed Jesus’ breakfast with fish, he was not free from the sense of guilt and shame. He needed personal healing from Jesus to restore their relationship. Jesus knew this. So Jesus wanted to heal him by his forgiving love through Peter’s love confession. Love is the essence of building relationships. By his denial Peter broke relationship with Jesus. Now Jesus wanted to restore relationship with Peter. Peter didn’t answer, “Yes, Lord, surely I love you” as he had done before. Rather he answered, “*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you*.” He meant, “Lord, you know that I love you even though I don’t tell you.” He meant, “Jesus, you know my heart well even though I don’t answer.”

Jesus knew Peter’s heart; still he wanted to hear Peter’s confession of love. God knows our heart that we love him. God still wants to hear our confession of love. God wants to hear from us our praise, prayers, requests, and songs in loud voices. Here we learn the importance of confession. In the beginning, God did not create the world with silence. The Bible didn’t say “God silenced, but he meant, “Let there be light.” But the Bible says, “And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.” (Ge 1:3) For God spoke, and it came to be. (Ps 33:9) Jesus called his disciples, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “Come and have breakfast!” “Do you love me?” We must respond to his calling and invitation in a loud voice, “Yes, Lord!” Jesus promised to build his church on Peter’s confession of faith. (Mt 16:18) Paul said in Romans 10:9,10, “*If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved*.” It is not too much for us to have a love confession for Jesus. “Lord, Jesus. I love you. I love you with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my strength.” Amen!

What did Jesus ask Peter to do after he reinstated him? Jesus asked him to feed his sheep and take care of them. Why is feeding sheep important to Peter and to Jesus? Here, feeding Jesus’ sheep means teaching God’s people with words of God and taking care of them so that they can live as people of God. Jesus asked Peter to be a shepherd, as he is the good shepherd. (Jn 10:11) Jesus could have asked other things from Peter as requirements of his forgiving love. But feeding Jesus’ sheep is the most important and valuable mission in this world for men to serve the Lord. This is the reason Jesus called Peter at the beginning. Jesus called him, “*Don’t be afraid, from now on I will make you a fisher of men.*” (Lk 5:10) We have many ways to express our love for Jesus. We have many ways to serve the Lord. But feeding Jesus’ sheep is the most difficult but important mission for those who love Jesus and follow him. “Do you love me? Feed my sheep” became my life direction and motto since I met Jesus thirty five years ago.

In today’s passage we learned why Jesus visited his disciples and how he reinstated Peter. Jesus taught us how to love sinners and how to restore relationships. First, Jesus visited his disciples. It is not easy for us to say ‘I am sorry’. We usually wait until others visit us before we apologize. Broken relationships remain until we initiate to restore. God initiated by sending Jesus Christ to us as a sin offering. One senior missionary told me how to restore his relationship with his wife after arguing with her. He said to her first, “Honey, I am sorry. I was wrong. Forgive me. I love you!” He said that recently he adds one more sentence, “Honey, I need you!” Let us come to God and confess our sins and ask for forgiveness of sin. “Lord, Jesus, I was wrong. Forgive me all my sins. I believe that you died for my sins. I trust in your unchanging love for me. Come to me and become my Lord and king! I love you, Jesus!” Amen!