PRAYER OF THE DAY, Lent 5

Almighty God, our Redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope in the world. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

[This evening’s Gospel story is an Easter story. It is the reconciliation scene between Jesus and Peter — Peter, who had denied Jesus three times. As I did earlier in this midweek Lent series, back when I preached on Jesus at the pool of Bethesda, so I want to do again: I want to read our Gospel Lesson aloud in the old King James Version. That is the version of this story I have known since I was a boy. And this version has the perfect wording of the final verse. It is a verse that has meant much to me over the years. In the King James Version there is a rhyme to it. Jesus says this to St. Peter: “what is that to thee? follow thou me.” It is our Lord’s call to steadfast and trusting discipleship. My sermon goes off in another direction, but still I love that final verse and I am glad to commend it to you in those old words.]

HOLY GOSPEL .....................................................................................................................John 21:15-22, KJV

15So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, loveth thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. 16He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, loveth thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. 17He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, loveth thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. 18Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. 19This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.

20Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? 21Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall
this man do? 22Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me.

HYMN LBW 474  Children of the Heavenly Father

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

Last week for this midweek Lent series, Pastor Carol Fryer preach to us about Evangelism. She pointed to the Samaritan woman at the well who dashed into her village to tell everybody about Jesus. Carol pointed to this woman as an example of powerful witness to Jesus. Forever such witness is a duty of the church. Jesus commands the church to preach the gospel and try to win souls to him. His instructions go this way:

18...All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20, RSV)

These are dominical, sovereign words. These are the marching orders of the Lord of the church and we must never forget them, but always try to win souls to Jesus.

But there is a second eternal duty of the church. In this evening’s reading, Jesus teaches this second step to St. Peter and through him to every generation of the church. And so it is that we come to my main text for this sermon. Three times Jesus repeats the same teaching to St. Peter. The first one goes this way:

15So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. (John 21:15, KJV)

"Lovest thou me more than these?" More than what? More than fishing. At the start of this story St. Peter murmured a short sentence that carried a whole world within it — a world so attractive that it drew the other disciples too. Peter’s words went this way:

3Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. (John 21:3, KJV)

Nothing wrong with fishing...in most cases. But on the lips of Peter, these words have almost an air of despair. Maybe not. Maybe Peter’s return to
fishing was a temporary and happy thing. But Jesus had called Peter to be a fisher not a fish but of humanity. Our Lord’s intention for Peter and the other disciples was that they were to win the world to him. But now Peter says...

... I go a fishing.

And the other disciples go along with him. For all I know we are dealing with a huge crisis in the early church. Peter’s words about fishing are subversive and seductive. They hold open the possibility of simply turning away from the massive and mysterious events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday and returning to the old familiar ways of life. How easily the scene is narrated:

3Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. (John 21:3, KJV)

The scene is easily told, but a world of surrender might be contained in these few words.

In any case, our resurrected Jesus soon stands on the seashore and bids his disciples to return to him. There is work to be done. There is this second kind of work. The first kind of work is evangelism: go out into all the world and win people to Jesus. The second kind of work is that the disciples should feed the flock. They should nourish the people, beginning with the children. Notice that in the second and third conversations with Peter, Jesus says, “feed my sheep.” But in his first words to Peter, Jesus speaks of his lambs. He speaks of the little ones, the vulnerable ones, those little ones in the church who need some help.

In this important conversation with Peter, Jesus speaks of love:

15So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

Do you love Jesus? I believe you do! Therefore we should join Peter of old in feeding Christ’s lambs.

And so this is a sermon about Sunday school teachers. It has taken me a while to get to my subject, but here we are: Sunday School teachers. I love them! Always have. When I was a little boy my Sunday school teachers and Vacation Bible School teachers taught me Bible stories and taught me to love Jesus. Along with my parents, my Sunday School teachers got me off to a good start in life, in my opinion. As I got older and more able to understand their sermons, my pastors became important for me and they too joined in St. Peter’s work of feeding the lambs and feeding the sheep. But when I was little,
when I was a lamb in Christ, my Sunday School teachers were my shepherds to Jesus. They loved Jesus and so they did what he said: they fed his lambs.

We have good and gentle Sunday School teachers, Vacation Bible School teachers, and Children’s Choir directors here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. They love Jesus, they love the Bible, and they love children. That is a great combination of loves. They are well prepared to feed Christ’s lambs. I would like us to have, say, two hundred children in our Sunday School. I know how important Sunday school was for me. I want our Sunday School to reach the souls of many of Christ’s lamb in our city.

Let me continue a little bit with this subject, “the lambs of Christ.” These lambs include the little children in our congregation, but I believe they include other people too. The lambs in Christ include the frail elderly, people in the hospital, and people who are struggling with poverty or confusion or doubts. These lambs also include grown-up converts to Christ, who might be good and strong in many respects, but who are new to the church. They are innocent and likely to be discouraged by things they do not understand or disappointing by things they see. Jesus says, “feed them!” And the whole congregation can help with that. It is best if the whole congregation helps with that — not just the clergy, but all of the brothers and sisters in the Lord.

So, this is the second step in the life of the church. Not only should we try to bring people into the church, but also, Jesus would have us feed them once they get here. In our congregation, we feed people through the liturgy, through the proclamation of God’s Word and the celebration of his sacraments. But I do not want you to underestimate your own ability to help feed the lambs and the sheep in this church. St. Peter loves Jesus, but so do you, and so he bids you to help nourish flock in his name, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.