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The Third Sunday after Easter

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As I sat with today's Gospel, a quote by Henri-Frédéric Amiel came to mind. It is one that many of you may know, and it goes like this:

*Life is short.*

*We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us.*

*So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind.*

With these words, we are instantly made aware of this present moment. That we have but one life, and it is not long. And then with a sense of urgency, the writer calls us into action — action like that to which Jesus calls Peter in today's Gospel. Be swift to love; make haste to be kind; Feed my sheep.

In her poem, *The Summer Day*, Mary Oliver expands on this and asks, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" It is an invitation to the reader to pause and reflect, to take a moment to consider how they spend their time, energy and resources, and on what and for whom? It is a question that we might do well to ask ourselves every day: What is it I plan to do with my one wild and precious life, today? And, adding to it, "How might God be calling me to use my gifts to help others? Theologian Frederick Buechner suggests this faithful response as a starting place. He says, "The place God is calling you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." I will repeat this: The place God is calling you to — the place where ministry happens, is the place where our deepest gladness, our deepest joy and the world's deepest hunger meet. It is a point of holy intersection. It is the place where what we have to offer may be received by others, and all of our lives transformed.

There at the lakeshore, the resurrected Christ has come to feed his disciples. They gather with him around the fire to partake of a nourishing meal of bread and fish and to share in the intimacy of fellowship. And they are fed. So, too, does Christ gather us at this table each Sunday. There, having professed our love for God and one another, we are invited to partake of the bread and wine, and to share in this fellowship with one another. Having been fed, Jesus' call to us echoes his call to Peter: "If you love me, go and do likewise. Feed my sheep." But what does it mean to feed Jesus' sheep? What does it mean for each of us, personally?

While Jesus' call may be to go and do likewise, we may find, like Peter, that we are more comfortable returning to what we have always done or known rather than to venture into uncharted territory. Peter, James and John were fishermen by trade. Early in his ministry, Jesus calls, "Simon Peter, son of John", as he beckons Peter to fish, not for fish, but for people. Peter and the others immediately accept Jesus' nudge into public ministry, and then, they accompany Jesus along the way, all the way to the cross. Yet, in the tension and fear of these final days, these very public ministers are hiding out. They shelter themselves behind locked doors, afraid of the unknown, uncertain of what to do, disconnected from Jesus, from their faith, from their mission. When Peter's world no longer made sense, he returned to what he knew — fishing.

Sometimes, it is easier to return to what is comfortable or familiar, than it is to step courageously into the unknown. I wonder how often we return to a former way of being or doing things because it is easier? When disruptions like a pandemic happen, it can make us want to cling to that which we know, to the familiar. We may seek things that remind us of who we were, or that bring us comfort. When the pandemic demanded that we move to virtual online church from in person worship, we had no choice but to go along. And yes, while online church kept us connected, along the way we lost a part of ourselves, a part of our connection with one another and our church. That is why for many of us, when we returned to in person worship last June, letting go of virtual worship was a no brainer. We joyfully and easily returned to the way it had been, and it felt good.

For Peter and the disciples - everything has changed, which maybe is why returning to fishing felt so right, so comfortable. Yet, fishing is not what Peter is destined for. Challenging Peter to re-engage ministry, Jesus invites him to feast on God's love and grace; to trust in God's promises and mercy. When Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?", it is as if he is asking, "Peter! What will you do with your one wild and precious life?"

And the only answer, which Jesus provides, is to Feed My Sheep. Peter loves Jesus so much that the only response is to step up, accept the call, and to model his life and ministry on Jesus'. To live, and to love, as Jesus lived and loved, as best as he can, even to the end.

Now, we may find ourselves discomfited as we consider the seriousness of what Jesus asks of those who believe and follow. To live and love as Jesus did is to be willing to sacrifice oneself and one's life for the gospel. It is to be willing to take a stand, for others and for the gospel, even at the risk of personal harm. We may wonder if one must die a martyr's death to truly live and love as Jesus did. While Peter offered himself fully, and ultimately did die a martyr's death on a cross, as Jesus foretold; we are wise to remember that many others, then and now throughout the millennia, lived and loved as Jesus did, without having to give their life. It is through the small, yet significant offerings of care and love for our neighbors that Jesus' love is shown. To love Jesus is to know Jesus. And to know Jesus means that we are called to embrace his way of living as best we can, so that in the end, God's love wins, and so that the world will recognize it as the source of all healing and salvation.

Each of us has been given unique gifts, skills and talents that we are called to employ as we extend ourselves in love and care to our neighbors. We are called to proclaim and show God's love to all those we meet, to one another, and to the stranger. We are called not to put a bushel basket over our light, but to let our light shine out brightly. And sometimes that is scary, daunting. Sometimes the world will resist us. It will push back, discredit, blame, or challenge us, because the truth of the gospel confronts the world. It is in those times, when proclaiming God's love and living it out as Jesus did is scary, that we are called to gather with one another, to encourage one another, as we call upon God for direction and wisdom.

Jesus came bringing abundant gifts. From the beginning of his ministry he brought abundance: You remember: water made to wine, thousands fed from a few fish and loaves, the blind man whose sight was restored, and today in our gospel, abundance again: more fish than they could imagine. Jesus is always offering God's abundance to us, with the invitation to receive God's abundant bread and wine, forgiveness and mercy, and the promise that God's love exceeds all.

And so, today I invite you to take time to think, and reflect, as you ask yourself what you plan to do with your one wild and precious life. And as you consider this, to think also about what it is that brings you deep gladness, deep joy. What is it that fills you up and is bubbling over, just waiting to be shared with others? How might what you have to share with the world be just the remedy to fill another person's hunger, longing, need for love?

Each week, we call upon God to show us the way forward, to show us how to live and love like Jesus, so that God's kingdom on earth might flourish and grow, and that all people might know the love of Jesus. At the conclusion of our communion feast, we pray these words:

*Send us now into the world in peace,  
and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you  
with gladness and singleness of heart;  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

It is through Jesus that we are able to go into the world and to be bold enough, like Peter, to say to God, "Yes, Lord, You know I love you." and then to respond, when God says to us, "Feed my Sheep." Amen.