

Doing What We Believe – John 21:1-19

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May 4, 2025

There are distinctive smells that make you sit up and take notice.

One day this past week, it was simply the act of walking outside on a warm and sunny day that provided the distinctive smell of spring. And it caught me by surprise and triggered memories of the outdoors in my youth.

The smell of a skunk is certainly distinctive too. That tends to trigger concern that there's something hidden near you that you don't want to encounter personally.

Other smells are distinctive—coffee brewing, bacon cooking, gasoline being pumped, grass being mowed, laundry being dried, flowers blooming, a garbage truck going by, the perfume on your sweetheart.

There is an interesting detail about this narrative in John 21 today that caught my attention. After Jesus had instructed the disciples to cast their nets to the other side of the boat, which triggered the catching of many fish, the disciples knew it was Jesus on the lakeshore. And they rushed from their boats out on the water to the shoreline to be near him.

And when they got ashore, John says that they saw a charcoal fire there. The smell of a charcoal fire is distinctive. All of us recognize it. When we're grilling, charcoal smells different than a gas grill. (Food tastes better on charcoal rather than on gas, many contend.)

When we smell charcoal, we know there's a meal coming up.

For Peter, the disciple who jumped in the lake and rushed to the shore when he learned it was Jesus there, the presence of a charcoal fire had to have triggered a memory.

Only one other time in the gospels is a charcoal fire referenced. That's in John 18. Peter was stumbling through the streets and alleyways of Jerusalem when he came upon a charcoal fire. Several people were standing around it in the gloom following Jesus' arrest, warming their hands over the flame. Peter stepped up and joined them. As he was rubbing his hands together one of his newfound companions said, "Hey, I know you. You aren't one of this man's disciples, are you?" And Peter said, "No, I am not."

Twice more he said that. Two more acts of betrayal.

So now, as Peter stands there on the beach in chapter 21, looking into the eyes of Jesus, the aroma of burning charcoal had to have flooded his nostrils. For Peter, it had to have triggered memories of his betrayal.

So, two stories with charcoal in them — the first that frames the story of Peter's denial of Jesus, and this second one that frames Peter's redemption.

It's around this fire on the shoreline that Jesus dines with Peter and the others and then redeems Peter by choosing him for special service.

Peter's redemption seems to happen in 3s. While first there were three denials by Peter, now there is a question Jesus asks Peter three times: "Do you love me?" And three times Peter answers in the affirmative: "Yes, Lord, you know I love you."

And that's followed by a commissioning Jesus issues three times over: "Feed my sheep."

The one who betrayed Jesus is now the one seemingly with the highest calling. If redemption is afforded Peter, surely it's afforded to all of us.

Why did Jesus ask Peter that same question three times? He heard Peter's affirmation the first time. After each answer, the same commissioning came: Feed my sheep, feed my sheep, feed my sheep. For emphasis, Jesus drilled into Peter: Loving him means loving others.

"During their breakfast chat, Jesus starts to talk about a time when his resurrection appearances will stop, a time when his absence will be keenly felt. Someone needs to tend to those who have come to depend on Jesus. Someone needs to guild a community of care and protection for the vulnerable gathered in Jesus' name. They need a new shepherd who can keep the sheep safe and secure, out of harm's way, or at least connected with each other.

"Each time Jesus asks Peter to feed his sheep—to tend the growing community of followers—he reinforces community built out of love for Jesus.

[Jesus' command to Peter to] "Follow me!" is not an invitation for Peter to follow Jesus to the heights of power and privilege and luxury. John's Jesus includes the invitation to follow as a foreshadowing of a different kind of call. Peter will help build a different kind of community—a beloved community—that for a time will resist imperial power structures. This invitation to follow, which John also extends to the readers, is an invitation to build community in a sea that seems empty, even as it teems with those needing a place to be called beloved."

(Katherine A. Shaner, *Christian Century* May 2025)

Feed Jesus' lambs. Tend his lambs. Love one another.

Speaking of loving, Matthew Hennessey in the Wall Street Journal this week asked a burning question: Where did all the Classy Americans Go?

In his op-ed, he said, “Personal qualities once synonymous with good character have fallen so far out of fashion as to seem like rumors from an ancient age. Did athletes really once accept defeat with dignity? Did people really restrain themselves from saying everything that popped into their heads? Did known philanderers refrain from trying to mount political comebacks? Did ex-presidents stay out of the limelight as a courtesy to their successors?

“Yes, kids, there was a time when prominent people were expected to exhibit grace. You couldn’t smack someone in the face on the Oscars broadcast and expect to resume your career in Hollywood. Shooting a CEO in cold blood earned you no fans. All that’s gone. Sorry you missed it.

“To adapt the old Fat Albert joke: Politicians in both parties are like school on Saturday — no class.”

Now, we paint with broad brushes most of the time when we make such claims. But, modeling love for neighbor seems to have dissipated among those from whom we would expect otherwise.

Did you all see the front page of the Shopper News this week? It featured a prominent story and photos about the Posies for the Pantry sale that happened here on April 12. Over \$6,000 raised to feed the hungry at the Shepherd of Hope Food Pantry. And it was all done by loving volunteers and vendors who joyfully organized and then greeted shoppers that day and helped them make purchases that had a positive impact on the less fortunate.

“Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.” Do what you believe.

I was at a fundraising banquet a week ago for an organization called “Come to the Water.” (The Peretz and Williams attended as well. Sandra provided entertainment.) Come to the Water is a 501©3 non-profit that raises money to send disadvantaged kids to Christian summer camp.

It was started by a friend of mine, Larry Moeller. Some of you know Larry. He’s a man of passionate faith who desires others to know Jesus and have life in his name. And church camp in the summer is one of the best ways kids can be introduced to Jesus’ love.

Since he and others started the organization, they have steadily grown to where they now fund 100 kids each summer. That’s about \$60,000 each year.

At the banquet last Saturday, the guest speaker was a counselor from Bearden Middle School who has been a devoted helper in getting kids from her school to camp. In fact, she not only identifies kids and recommends them from her school, she went and spent the week with a group of them at camp last summer.

A middle school teacher, who chose to spend one of her precious few off-weeks in the summer with some of those same students she teaches.

“Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep.” Do what you believe.

In both of these cases, it’s been a community of folks doing the tending of God’s sheep. A community of loving disciples committing themselves to loving others.

Communities of people that show love for each other and those outside their community are the best evidence of the God we follow.

A young scientist, who had always been skeptical about religion, found friendship among a church community he came to enjoy. They were friendly, caring, and joyful.

At some point the young scientist, Alan, embraced the Christian faith that he had never embraced before. One of the friends he had made from that group, who brought him into the church community, said to him, "Alan, I thought you were never going to become a believer unless there was first enough evidence."

"Yes," he replied, "and I still require it. But that's precisely why I now believe. It's how you all love each other that strikes me most. I never considered that evidence before. A good scientist, you know, considers all the facts. I simply haven't found the love you Christians have for each other anywhere else. That's evidence enough for me that Jesus is Lord."

A community's acting out their belief was enough proof for a young scientist to embrace God's love for him.

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. That's how we live out the belief we have in the resurrected Christ.