

Years ago a woman told me about her child's nightmares. The child had watched a news program with one of the parents. That night the child could not sleep, scared that cancer might invade their family, frightened at the thought of terrorists and child abusers and kidnapers and drugs that end up hurting more than helping. The next morning, the child was afraid to go to school, afraid of being kidnaped or shot. The mother was at wits end, unable to find a good answer to her child's fears. And then, she told more: "The problem is, I'm as afraid as Freddie is.. It feels to me as though the world is falling apart."

With today's Gospel reading we are near the very end of the Gospel of John. Jesus had been crucified and resurrected. Mary Magdalene had seen the resurrected Christ first -- and so had the disciples, first without Thomas and then with Thomas. Now Jesus appeared to seven disciples -- we are not told why only seven. Five of the seven were named, and they were a flawed bunch. Two were known for their hot heads. Three had doubted or denied Jesus: -- Nathaniel was the one who said of Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" -- Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. -- Thomas, as we saw last week, was the famous doubter -- Doubting Thomas -- the one who, when told that Jesus was alive, said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I WILL NOT believe." Perhaps Jesus picked such a bunch so that we wouldn't feel inferior. If Jesus could do so much with *these* guys, he can probably do something with me. Perhaps our limitations are not as important as Christ's power to transform our lives.

Several of you have heard me tell this, but one evening as I was leading a Bible study in my very first church, an elderly Maine-born retired nurse really got into the lesson and suddenly blurted out, "You know, Florence, if God can work through *you*, he can use anybody!" We all laughed, and I managed to feel okay about it at the time, not really sure if it was an insult or not, but through the years the truth of her statement has defined for me the power of the Christian church. It's true, you see. God can and does use anybody! It's not *our* power, it is the power of the Lord at work in and through our mistakes and strengths that produces fruit and life in our lives and in the church.

In today's lesson, Jesus appeared once again to his uncertain disciples, who had gone back to fishing after his death, and Jesus challenged them, stretched them: When Jesus called to his disciples to "cast your net to the right side of the boat," there were a couple of significant things going on. First, since this was net fishing, there was little reason to expect that changing the location of the nets by just a few feet would be likely to make any difference in the catch. So this was a call to try something that seemed to offer little prospect of success.

Second, fishing nets would normally have been cast to the left side of the boat so they could be hauled in more easily led by the "culturally" stronger arm—the right arm. Casting to the right meant if they caught anything, they would have to depend on their weaker arms to haul the catch in.

Jesus' call to put the nets on the right side stretched the disciples to fish in ways they hadn't done before. And when they did, not relying on their experience but on Christ's call, their catch of 153

large fish meant their call, and their catch, was the whole world. (153 was the number of nations believed to exist at the time.) (taken from UMC discipleship website)

Then, of course, there's Peter. Jesus asked him, three times, "Do you love me?" Jesus told him, "Feed my sheep, tend my lambs, feed my flock." The gospel lesson lets us see how Jesus gave Peter, who had three times denied even knowing Jesus, three opportunities to say, "Yes, Lord, I love you." Grace was offered to Peter three times; and then a hugely important job to do.

A story I have shared in this church before. A boy loved horses, more than anything. He begged Mr. Smith, the owner of a nearby stable, to let him help him with his horses. One day, though, the boy left a gate open so that one of the horses got into the feed room. The horse ate too much, got colic, and died. The boy was so upset that he could not bring himself to go back to the stable. He knew that Mr. Smith was disappointed in him and would never let him near his horses again. A couple of days went by, and then the doorbell rang. The boy went to the door, and there was Mr. Smith. When the boy saw him, he broke into tears, sobbing his shame and sorrow. Mr. Smith let him cry for a minute, and then said, "Why aren't you at the stable? I need you. There's lots of work to be done." The boy stammered, "How can you trust me now?" Mr. Smith replied gruffly, "You're the one kid I know won't ever leave a gate open again. Now let's go get to work." (Source unknown)

Feed my sheep. Today's lectionary offers stories of both Peter and Saul, who was later known as Paul. The Risen Lord gave Peter what he needed. The Risen Lord also accosted Saul as he was on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians there. Saul was a fervent Jew, well-educated and politically connected. He was convinced that the Christian movement was totally wrong, and so he was putting all his efforts into stopping the Christians. But God had a different idea. On the way, Saul was blinded by the Light of the Risen Jesus, who asked him, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In just a few verses, Saul became a believer and was baptized... We should realize that this process required significant "stretching" by all involved. Saul was stretched to the breaking point by Jesus and then by the healing and hearing he obtained from Ananias and the Christian community. Ananias was stretched by a vision from God in which he was told to heal a man who had been sent to destroy all the Christians there. And the Christian community was stretched in ways they probably could not have imagined by finding themselves in the position of needing to receive and support this man as one of their own after his healing and baptism. (Discipleship resources, online) Saul, later known as Paul, was led to spread the Christian Gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

In both stories, it's all about what GOD was doing, not just about what human beings were doing. The Risen Lord approached Peter and Saul and made a total difference in how they lived the rest of their lives. That's what God does!

Today in our world it may feel as though we're walking through a mine field, trying to duck all the bad things going on around us. No matter what we hear about or experience, though, we better not forget that the Living Lord has work for *us, even today*, to do. "Feed my sheep, tend my lambs..." A story by James S. Hewett may help us better envision what these words have to do with us. "A true story: Years ago, a flight from Denver to Wichita was boarding. On an ambulance litter attendants carried a 225-pound man as the last traveler to board. As they cradled him into a seat in

front of us, it was evident that he was totally paralyzed from his shoulders down. He was strapped in tightly, but as the pilot taxied to the runway the force lunged him to the right, causing him to fall toward the next seat. The stewardess again propped him up in an upright position. Hastily, we were airborne. Beverages were served, then a meal. As I finished my meal, I looked up to see the paralyzed young man, probably in his late twenties, with the meal in front of him and no one to feed him. My eyes filled with tears. The hostesses were busy serving food to all passengers, and here was a person traveling alone who could only look at the meal. It was beautifully prepared, tasty, and far above average for airline food.

"Before I could wipe the tears from my eyes, I had slipped out of my seat to his side and inquired if the stewardess would be helping him eat. He did not know. I asked if I might help him. He responded with, 'Oh, thank you. I would be grateful for your help.' As I cut the meal into bite sizes and placed them in his mouth, I felt awkward, conspicuous, but much needed. Before long I was coordinating bites as well as if they were entering my own mouth. The young man told me of his unfortunate accident, his loneliness, his joys, his struggles, his faith, his hope. His name was Bill. Our spirits blended - we experienced sacrament!

Upon returning to my seat, my spirit was humbled as I thought of all the people who have had the Good News of the gospel set before them. It's available, but no one stops to feed them as they are crippled with spiritual and psychological paralysis. No one to feed them. My spirit flowed to the words Jesus asked Peter, 'Do you love me? Feed my sheep.'" (p. 117, *Illustrations Unlimited*)

How many folks do we pass by each day who are choking on bad news and starving to death spiritually? Where has no one taken the time to listen, and to provide simple kindness? Where have we refused to allow ourselves to be "stretched" in ways that will let God's powerful presence can shine through us for someone else? "Feed my sheep."

Our world can be scary. Nightmares may push into our days. We pray that we may be spared the violence, the anger, the disappointment. We diet and exercise, hoping to die healthy MANY years from now. But no matter how blessed we are, each one of us will have or already has troubles, some of them very hard to handle. There is only One who is able to truly and forever offer us life, One who has shown us the way of life in the midst of death itself. Jesus Christ has laid down his life for us so that we can learn and be stretched to risk fully living our own. By this, *we* will be fed as well as others, and we will learn of LIFE beyond any of our expectations, fears, or hopes! This is the offer of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Feed my sheep." The Christian church was founded on this command. This is still our first responsibility: to feed a world starving for the good news of God's love. We are given huge resources to carry out this command. God is with us every step. Christ goes before us. The Holy Spirit prompts us to stretch: to notice the needs around us and to see where we are able to reach out. Also, we are re-fueled every time we worship, every time we turn to God in prayer, every time we come together as Christian brothers and sisters to study the Bible and to remind ourselves and each other that our first and last "belonging" is to God. As he did with Peter and Paul, may our Savior stretch us with love and challenges that will lead us to life. Amen.