

“Blind, Smelly Sheep”

John 21:15-17; Acts 9:1-20

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Between our two stories today, from Damascan Desert to Galilean shoreline, there are three distinct interactions: Jesus and Peter. Jesus and Saul. Jesus and Ananias. One ‘wanna-be disciple’ who certainly had his **share of failures**. One ‘*don’t* wanna-be disciple’ who ardently sought to ‘**share**’ in the ‘**failure**’ of this fledgling new ‘Way’ called ‘Christianity.’ And one *gonna*-be disciple who was both reluctant and yet resolute to fulfill God’s will for his life. All three of these key players in the Biblical narrative demonstrate various aspects of just what is involved in fulfilling Jesus’ charge to being a disciple today: **“Feed my lambs.”** Peter, Saul, and Ananias describe both who we are to minister to, and who we ourselves can be: **“Blind, Smelly Sheep.”**

As I said in the introduction to the Gospel reading, Simon Peter (I use both names because he still could display some of his old identity, his old carnal self, even as he diligently sought to be his ‘new and improved’ persona of ‘Rocky’) was no doubt still down on himself for having abandoned his Lord and Savior at the end. As this mystery man who sure SOUNDED like Jesus tells him where to put the nets... just like old times... Simon Peter was probably pretty excited at the prospect of ‘getting the old band back together again.’

But then, when the question of **“Do you love me?”** pops up not just once, but a second time, and a third, the analogy between this question and his denial was probably just tearing him up! ‘I want to continue to SHOW you that I love you, Jesus, but I KEEP messing up! I can be so blind to my own failures that I really stink this place up!’

And Simon Peter was right. Jesus does know everything, and certainly does know that ‘Rocky’ loves him. But to truly LOVE is more than a matter of the heart... but of hands, feet, and voice. Feelings and words are useless unless backed up by action. Love must be more than a noun... but a verb. Not just ‘e-motion.’ But MOTION. And in the same way that God knows our needs before we ask, He yet still wants us to ARTICULATE those thoughts and concerns in prayer. If we truly love the Good Shepherd, we must not only show that love to Him, but to His sheep. Sheep who, just like Peter, can even betray the one they love.

We DO know, however, that sometimes those whom we are to care for, minister and witness to, act more like WOLVES than sheep. Like Saul. Who wanted to ‘devour’ all of those

who belonged to 'the Way.' Another term for 'Christian' (which only appears 3 times in Scripture (2x in Acts, 1x in 1 Peter), this likely refers to those words in John 14:6, ***"I am the WAY, the truth, and the life."*** Or, perhaps tying together O.T. Psalm 119 and 2 Peter in N.T., which refers to believers who follow ***"the way of truth."*** Regardless, this 'Hebrew of Hebrews' who described himself as a 'faultless Pharisee,' had NO love for these 'WAY-ward' Christians, being filled with venomous hate and murderous threats. And for his spiritual blindness to this 'way of truth,' Jesus really caught his attention by adding PHYSICAL blindness. I find it interesting to note that he was blind for THREE days. Three days in total darkness. Like say, the darkness found in a TOMB...? Hmmmm...

I was also struck by his initial question upon being struck down by the blinding light. ***"Who are you, Lord?"*** (Acts 9:5) By calling out the name 'Lord,' it would indicate he had some inkling of just 'who' it was. Though he certainly would not have had the type of intimate relationship with Jesus to know his voice. Perhaps Saul was referring to the "Lord God Almighty," knowing that such a powerful display had to be from God. Just not His Son... Regardless, for the repugnant way he was treating those followers of the Way, God would visit him with **physical blindness**, in order that he might gain **spiritual sight**. Sometimes it takes times of great darkness for us to 'see the light.'

Our third encounter with Jesus came through Ananias. (Not to be confused with Ananias and Sapphira, a couple who paid the ultimate price for their lying to their faith community about the proceeds of a sale of property. Apparently God don't like ugly, which includes being a **hypocritical Christian**. Good to know...) Anyway, unlike Saul, when Ananias heard a voice, he recognized it immediately. ***"Here I am, Lord."*** (Acts 9:10) 'What can I do for you, my Lord and my God?'

And even though he was fearful of what might happen to him at the hands of this evil persecutor of Jesus' followers, upon hearing God's purposes for Saul, Ananias obeyed. We read that he went to the house, laid hands on Saul, and said, ***"Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."*** (v. 17)

Ananias, who didn't know if this 'blind guy' actually had a concealed knife to kill him, calls this hateful enemy of his fellow Christians 'brother,' witnesses to him about JESUS, and gives him the 'secret handshake' of the Holy Spirit. WOW! Talk about a leap of faith? Like that song says, 'Trust and obey...'

What this all tells us is that its not easy to 'trust and obey' Jesus' command to "**feed my sheep.**" Those 'sheep' stink, and can be pretty 'blind' to what life in Christ really means. AND, that those 'sheep' can be US! We are no different than those we minister to. We are **Peter**, at times denying Christ by our actions... while knowing in our heart that we love Him. We are **Saul**, sometimes blind to the reality of Jesus in our lives, and in our world. We are **Ananias**, knowing of the dangers of standing for Christ, but being willing to yet say, 'Here I am.' All three of these men stand to remind us that **Caring for God's people can be pretty dirty business.**

In his book "*They Smell Like Sheep*," author Lynn Anderson writes that "The chief biblical model (for discipleship) is that of SHEPHERD, for a **shepherd lives with sheep**. A shepherd **knows each sheep by name**; he **nurtures** the young, bandages the wounded, **cares** for the **weak**, and protects them all. A shepherd *smells like sheep.*"

Anderson goes on to say that "In the body of Christ, we all play the role of shepherd to someone. You play the role of shepherd as you **parent** (or grand-parent) a child in the faith or teach a Sunday School class. You are a shepherd when you **disciple** a fellow Christian. Older men and women shepherd as they **mentor** (tutor) younger men and women; you shepherd as you **lead a friend to Christ**. The biblical principles of shepherding are remarkably simple, yet powerful impacting!"

Powerful, yes. Simple, perhaps. But definitely NOT ALWAYS EASY. EVEN FOR PASTORS. In closing, I would relate a story a friend passed along to me this week about a fellow pastor and author named **Jim Cymbala**. Some of you may be familiar with his book, Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire – What Happens When God's Spirit Invades the Hearts of His People. Written back in '97, this book shows what the Holy Spirit can do when believers get serious about **prayer** and the **gospel**. But more on that later...

Anyway, after the last of many services of Holy Week culminating in Resurrection Sunday, a few years back, Cymbala was sitting on the front of the worship platform (y'all know how I cringe at the word 'stage' in church), pretty much exhausted from the rigors of the week. And up from a pew walks this bedraggled, filthy man in his 50's, clearly right off of the street. Which is nothing unusual in this church, as it is located in a pretty rough area of Brooklyn NY. They have homeless people come in all the time, usually asking for money or other assistance. As he gets closer, the man asks, "Could I talk to you?"

Cymbala, not at his strongest at this time, admits to having said something to himself like 'What a way to end a Sunday. I've had such a good time, preaching and ministering, and here's this guy who probably just wants money for more wine.' And as he gets within about 5 feet, he notices that the man smells HORRIBLE. (Definitely NOT a 'fresh wind.')

So bad that he can't even inhale while looking at him.

And so, after asking his name ("David") and establishing that he is indeed homeless, having spent the night before in an abandoned truck, Cymbala instinctively reaches for his wallet to give the man some money. But, much to his surprise, 'David' puts his finger up to the pastor and responds, "I don't want your money. I want this Jesus, the One you were talking about, because I'm not going to make it. I'm going to die on the street."

Upon hearing this, Cymbala began to weep. That in his weakness, he was going to slough off and dismiss with a few dollars a child of God who wanted so much more than mere money. This really smelly sheep had his eyes opened to what was most important... a relationship with Jesus... and he needed a shepherd to guide him home to that Great Shepherd. Because he didn't want to die alone in the wilderness of doubt and pain, but in the security of God's 'sheepfold.'

Convicted of his own human denial of another hurting 'sheep,' Cymbal hugged the man, crying together with him, and led him to Christ. And today, just a few years later, 'David' is now an ordained associate pastor of a church in New Jersey. His life transformed because someone was 'Ananias' to him... one who answered God's call, 'Here I am,' and brought healing to a broken sinner who would become a 'shepherd' in his own right..

So I would challenge you with the question, 'What 'David' do you have in your life?' What lost soul is out there just waiting for you, just to simply say, 'Could I talk to you?' Someone who doesn't simply want money, but a far more valuable resource: TIME. Time to share the greatest treasure of all: JESUS. And in the course of our busy days to come, as we ponder how WE are to 'show the love' to God, remember those words of Jesus to Peter: **"Feed my sheep."** We are ALL called to be 'shepherds.' And that, in our own ways, we are ALL the same... 'Blind, Smelly Sheep'...

Closing Prayer, from "Moments With the Savior," by Ken Gire

Dear Lord Jesus,

Thank you that no matter how miserably I have let you down, you are always there to pick me up. No matter how many times I have failed you, you are always there to forgive me. No matter how far I have drifted, you are always there on the shore, waiting for me to return—waiting with a comforting fire, warm food, and an affirming arm to put around my shoulder.

I thank you, too, Lord, for how you arrange circumstances to restore me to a productive life of living for you. How you bring back the precious memories of a time when my love for you was so pure and intense. And how you gently recall to my mind the painful memories that need to be brought to the surface and healed.

I love you for so many reasons, Jesus. I love you for calling me to follow you. I love you for the honor you have bestowed on me to labor with you in building your kingdom. I love you for teaching me so much. I love you for being so patient when I am so slow to learn. I love you for the great friend you are to me. I love you because you're on my side, in my corner, fighting for me, not against me. I love you for all that I am because of you. I love you because with your tender hands you lift the crushed pile Satan leaves behind when he winnows, and you blow away the chaff. I love you that you don't focus on those husked failures but rather on the kernel, however small, of genuine love left in your palm. And seeing it, you take great delight.

Thank you for all the intimate moments we spend together. I know they mean as much to you as they do to me; and if the whole truth were known, probably more. It thrills me to know that I have contributed, even in a small way,
To your divine pleasure. And that I can bring a smile to the face of God.

Thank you for all those special people you put in my life. I ask that you send the same healing you have given me to those whom I love. And for those hurting souls around the world who need to know that inner peace that only you can bring... even in the face of all the turmoil that surrounds us.

Thank you for the privilege of sitting at your nail-scarred feet, and gathering at your life-giving Table. Grant me the grace to never regard those privileges casually or to neglect them but to come there humbly, and to come there often.

Help me to understand that only a few things really are necessary in life. And when you get right down to it, only one: to sit at our feet... listening... looking into your eyes... and adoring you...