

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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John 21:15

**Challenge to the Church: "Feed My
Lambs"**

- 1. Jesus' directive to Peter**
- 2. Jesus' directive to us**

Hymns: 84 – 492 – Closing: 514

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

John 21:15 –

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

"It takes a village to raise a child." I'd imagine many of you have heard that proverb. Is it a biblical proverb?

If we were to do a quick word search for that phrase in the Bible, we would not find that sentence there. In fact, we don't know the exact origin of the phrase. Some people can trace it back to a number of African cultures; others trace it to Native American culture.

What does it mean? This proverb teaches that the parents of a child are not the only ones who are needed to raise and shape that child:

- Neighbors will be crossing paths with them and making an impression on them.
- Teachers will be teaching these children in a school.
- The Little League coach will be spending quite a bit of time with them.
- The clerk at Walgreen's or Bartells will be noticed by them.

- The librarian will make an impression on them.
- Even the drivers on the road or in the neighborhood will be noticed by them and be "teaching" them.

Every single person that comes in contact with a child will have some degree of influence on them. Some of you adults here today might be able to think back to people from your childhood who had an influence on you, who were ordinary "village folks," whether they knew it or not.

Those thoughts should lead people to know that they should realize this and take on the responsibility of doing it well in the "village," even if they're not the immediate parents.

As we close our short sermon series on Christian Education today, this is the concept that we will explore. Today we focus on John 21, where Jesus has some words for Peter.

1. Jesus' directive to Peter

We read in John 21, "*When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.'*"

To understand the context of what Jesus is saying, we need to review the background of this verse. The time when Jesus said this was after he had been crucified and had been raised from the dead. He had appeared to the women at the tomb and had instructed them to tell his disciples to go to Galilee to meet him (Matthew 28:10). We hear in John 21 that a group of them were at the Sea of Galilee, and that some of these former fishermen had taken the opportunity to go out fishing at night. Early in the morning Jesus appeared on the shore and revealed to them that it was he. In great joy they came ashore and had a breakfast meal with him that he had prepared. After breakfast, Jesus wanted to speak with Peter.

You most likely remember that Peter had denied knowing Christ three times when he was on trial at the high priest's court. It was Jesus' desire to reinstate Peter as an apostle of his. Therefore, in our Gospel Reading for today, he asked him three times if he loved him. Three

times Peter said the he did, and three times Jesus gave him a similar command. In the verse we are focusing on, Jesus told him, “Feed my lambs.”

As Jesus reinstated Peter and gave him instructions for his ministry, these were significant words:

- FEED – This is a general word for bringing animals to pasture so they could be nourished with the food they needed. The interesting thing about Jesus’ command is that the tense indicated it was to be an ongoing action. It was something Peter should continually do. We could rightly translate this, “Keep on feeding my lambs” or “Continually feed my lambs.”
- LAMBS – This is a vivid word. It is not the word for “sheep” (grown animal). In fact, this word is a form of the word lamb that has had a diminutive force added to it! Little lamb. Lambkin. These are the littlest lambs possible in the flock!

It’s no surprise that Jesus feels this way about the lambkins in his fold. In Matthew 18 we read, *“The disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea... See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.’ ”*

Why would the little lambs of the Church and the world need to be taught the truths of the word and given good examples by those around them? A few reasons:

1. They are sinful and in need of a Savior. They are not exempt to the effects of sin. Even little children need to know that they need a Savior. They need to know of the one who loved them so dearly and gave his life on the cross to pay for the sin of the world. That is not “adult material,” but faith-building information that little children need to know about also!
2. Secondly, if we think about that stage of life, little lambs have no knowledge of such things on their own. They are not able to crack open their *New International Version* and read up on this. They need to be taught from little on about the Savior.
3. Thirdly, think about the world’s influence around them that will teach them other principles and worldly behavior. Little lambs will see the behavior and hear the speech of people of the world who will not be interested in reflecting moral values on them. After all, there are “other types” in the village besides those who have a Christian influence. I think about how today a family might be watching a pretty innocuous show or a sporting event at home that the parents are fine with, but the commercials in between need to be censored! Even the checkout stand with its magazine material is not safe. Such is the world’s influence.

In this week’s focus, the important thing to realize in this verse is who exactly these lambkins are that Peter will be concerned about teaching. Are they Peter’s children? No, this is not Jesus’ meaning. These are the children of the Church and the children of the world that Peter will encounter. This command is rightly given to pastors who will come after Peter until the end of time, and also to church members who are here today who will come along until the end of time.

To all of us, Jesus says, “Feed my lambs!”

2. Jesus' directive to us

Therefore, we need to think about this high directive that Jesus has given to us. The phrase "It takes a village to raise a child" will be true of us as a congregation as well.

We have seen some children sing and play in our church service this morning. Whose children are they? A parent here might say, "He is my child." Not an incorrect answer, but not a complete answer. Others of you might point to the parents out there in the pew and say, "That's their child." Not an incorrect answer, but not a complete answer. One thing we must note after seeing Jesus' attitude in Matthew 18 is that "They are Jesus' children." And after thinking about what Jesus says to Peter this morning, they are our children. **These are our children! Jesus says, "Feed my lambs."**

Historically, the Lutheran Church has heard these words of Jesus and has taken to heart the instruction of children. Martin Luther wrote two Catechisms – a small one and a large one – for instruction. After composing these, he wrote to pastors:

"I... beg you for God's sake, my beloved brethren who are pastors and preachers, that you take the duties of your office seriously, that you have pity on the people who are entrusted to your care, and that you help me to teach the catechism to the people, especially those who are young."

The confirmation instruction process in Lutheran congregations of our Wisconsin Synod has traditionally been thorough and rigorous. Also, for centuries Lutherans have found it valuable to have schools to educate the children in the truths of our faith. Historically, it has been a hallmark of Lutheran circles.

As we think about all of this today, what can we say about Christian Education of our children at Holy Trinity and in our Wisconsin Synod? I'll start with pastors. What will pastors think about as they consider their ministry and their congregation in regard to feeding Jesus lambs?

- One thing a pastor thinks about is his personal contact with the children of the church and school.

How valuable this personal contact is! Contact with these little ones is not time wasted. If he has the chance to instruct a bit, it is valuable. If it is simply building rapport and spending time as a "real person" who also happens to lead the Sunday worship, this modeling of Christian behavior is valuable.

- Another topic a pastor continually thinks about are the programs that the church is offering for the children:
 - Is the Cradle Roll information that parents get in the mail from church up-to-date?
 - Are parents made to feel welcome on Sundays? Do they have what they need to care for their children and try to go to church?
 - Are the Sunday children's ministries reaching the children in the Sunday School and Youth classes?
 - Are these Sunday ministries staffed well? Is the planning and preparation for these programs being well done?
 - How is the health of the grade school, which is a vital arm of the church?
 - Is the school adequately staffed? Are teachers up-to-date on their teaching methods and with their materials, especially in religion classes?

These are important questions a pastor will constantly be asking, as Jesus directs pastors to "Feed my lambs!" Time spent in planning and executing these ministries is time well spent. I'd submit that you also, as members of our congregation, will also have an interest in how these ministries are going and in serving to carry them out.

In our congregation here at Holy Trinity, more should be said about the commitment we have undertaken to operate a Lutheran grade school, for this does not come without effort and cost. Some historical perspective on our own grade school might be helpful. When Holy Trinity Lutheran School opened its doors in 1979, 32 students enrolled in classes that were held in the old church basement. The philosophy at that time was that there would be a commitment on the part of every church member to support the school. The contributions of parents and the contributions of the entire church would cover the school's costs. It would be a "village" that would educate the children.

Another part of our historical perspective is the buildings that have been acquired – first, the old school building that was purchased and moved here from a golf course in 1981 that currently houses our pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Secondly, the building project that occurred over ten years ago through which God blessed us with a larger and up-to-date facility to be able to feed his lambs. It is evident that the forefathers of our church who have gone before us took the mission of feeding Jesus' lambs to heart!

Is this still true? It is good for us to ask this question today, especially due to the fact that we still have a grade school connected with our church. It is one thing to operate quality children's ministries in general, but it is quite a commitment to operate a grade school. The reason is that a grade school does not come without sacrifice, as our forefathers here at Holy Trinity knew. Much energy is required to operate a grade school of any size. Also, having a grade school will never be a revenue neutral ministry.

If it is still true that we want to feed Jesus' lambs during the week by operating a Lutheran grade school, this will involve resolve and commitment of us all:

- Prayer – It will involve your fervent prayers. Do you pray for our principal and staff? Do you pray for the teachers and the students at Holy Trinity

Lutheran School? With the challenges that come with the operation of a school and with the teaching inside its walls, your prayers are vital. *"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective"* (James 5:16)

- Serving – The ways that a school can benefit from the service of parents and members of our church are numerous. The library, hot lunch, field trips, instruction in some expertise, coaching, tutoring, costumes, and much more can benefit a school. Might you be able to serve in some way to assist in feeding Jesus' lambs?
- Maintenance – With a large building, an aging building, and a gym building comes maintenance. General upkeep is vital. Painting, lighting, cleaning, electrical, plumbing, roofing, and more are an ongoing commitment. This is something that teachers are not called to do. This is something that a couple property board men cannot do. It involves talents and time from people in the village.
- Financial support – Holy Trinity Lutheran School continues to exist under the philosophy that it will require the support of all people in the village to be able to operate. Do we still feel this way? This is why in every box of offering envelopes that our members receive annually, there are not only general white envelopes for church offerings, but also yellow envelopes for a special support of our school.

Having a Lutheran school here is such a blessing, but it will not come without the support of us all. It will not come without sacrificial giving by our members. It will not come without the effort and support of people here who are now grandparents; or future parents; or families without children directly in our school. Why? Because Jesus says, "Feed my lambs," and our school is a great blessing that we have all committed to in being part of the "village."

After all, "It takes a village to raise a child." Today we have seen that although these exact words are not in a proverb of Scripture, the thought of this proverb is certainly Scriptural.

As we close our sermon series on Christian Education by looking at our congregation and its lambs, may God lead us to be an active part of the village. And may he bless our efforts in teaching the next generation the grace and salvation of our Savior! Amen.