### “Feed My Sheep” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, May 5, 2019

**Revelation 7:9–12**

9After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10They cried out in a loud voice, saying,
“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

11And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, 12singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.”

**John 21:4–6, 14–19**

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. 5Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” 6He said to them, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in . . . .

14This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. 15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” 16A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.”17He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. 18Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.” 19(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

As I read these passages, I see Revelation to be speaking about *hope fulfilled*, and John to be speaking about *love*—both love that is present and love that needs future fulfilling.

The gospel narrates one of the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus, one where Jesus finds a way to really impress a certain message upon Peter. It is not a message about his death, or even about his Resurrection. It is not about covenant or holiness or sin or the message to be preached. It is just about love and nurturing.

Jesus uses Peter’s emotions as a pathway to get to Peter’s mind. The three-times asked question, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” is designed to arouse Peter’s emotions, because it sounds like Jesus is questioning Peter’s loyalty. It provokes Peter, and his answers become a bit indignant. Jesus is prodding Peter in order to arouse him to full attention, and it works. Peter hears the answers: “Feed my lambs. . . . Tend my sheep. . . . Feed my sheep” (21:15–17). He is telling Peter to be a loving leader of the “flock” of believers. Peter is not the *administrative* head, but he is the *charismatic* head and the leading preacher of the Jesus movement. That makes him the *de facto* leader of the Jesus movement. Jesus’ main message to him is to love and nurture and guide the people. Yes, the people are referred to as “sheep,” not a particularly *complimentary* label, but probably an accurate one. People tend to follow their leaders, as sheep follow the shepherd, and as sheep know the shepherd’s voice—another image that Jesus uses.

The shepherd was an image commonly used both by the Jews and their neighbors for a protective leader. Jesus adds to the image, and he says more about the sheep.

I want to note how Jesus provokes Peter. He uses Peter’s love to arouse Peter’s feelings and his commitment, so as to give him the message about taking care of the believers. Jesus challenges Peter in a way that hurt his feelings, but he does it to get Peter’s full attention, so he can sufficiently impress him with the need to “feed,” that is, spiritually nurture, the sheep. They will need loving leaders. They are going to face hardships. Some of them will be killed, including the apostle James, the brother of John and son of Zebedee, the first of the apostles to be martyred in the cause.

That brings me to the Revelation passage, because it is a vision of what Christian martyrs will see when they arrive in heaven. In Rev 7:14 it says that the people clothed in white in this passage are martyrs. These former mortals will join with angels in worshiping God and Jesus. Among the worshipers will be also the mysterious elders and the four living creatures. Their identities are never explained, but we can guess that the elders include some of the great figures of Biblical history. We are told in chapters 4 and 5 that there are 24 of these elders seated on 24 thrones (4:4), and when they speak, they use biblical ideas like “you created all things . . . . the lion of Judah, the Root of David . . . . a kingdom and priests” (4:10; 5:5, 10). The elders speak with biblical wisdom. I think the elders are the great figures of Israel’s past, and believers are being told they will meet and join them in worshiping God.

Revelation gives a message of comfort and reward to a persecuted church. Revelation was written around the year 95 A.D., apparently when the emperor Domitian was persecuting Christians. Some scholars question the extent of that persecution, and claim that Revelation was written during a time when Christians were debating whether they should compromise with Roman society or completely withdraw from it. I think this debate *was* happening, but so was the persecution, and there is evidence for it.

Revelation was offering both help and advice to Christians, *helping* with their faith in the triumph of goodness, and *advising* Christians to refuse to compromise on their essential loyalty. The main tool for this helping and this advising, is to show the joyous worship experience that takes place in the throne room of The Word, the Son of God. What *is*, after all, the motivating force of worship? It is *love*, expressing your love and appreciation to God, and feeling God’s love coming back at you. Worship is a real experience of communion and spiritual understanding, usually impossible to describe or put into words. As Paul put it, “the Lord is near. Do not worry about anything . . . . And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:5–7).

How do *you* experience worship? Do you feel a gentle breeze, with green leaves swaying? Do you feel a sense of celebration, with perhaps a suggestion of music? Maybe worship brings back memories. It may bring a feeling of peace. Or do you hear yourself saying, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (John 21:15)?

Worship is our deepest and most indescribable experience. It is where we may get a glimpse of the divine, a picture or an image or a feeling that becomes a valuable part of our own religious experience. Think for a minute what your image or your impression in worship is. It doesn’t have to be the same as anybody else’s. It doesn’t have to be a glorious and overwhelming experience. It may just be, as I said, a *glimpse*, and yet, it is valuable to *you*, and it is valid. Whatever worship does for you, is personal to *you*.

In worship, we are learning to love God. And in service and ministry, we are learning to love people. It’s alright that we’re just novices at both of these things. Just remember Jesus and his love, and go forth in his Spirit. You will start to feel that your hopes are beginning to be fulfilled, even here. You will start to feel the peace of God, and you will bring that peace into everything you do.

The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything. Jesus said, “My peace ... I give to you” (John 14:27).