

Sermon for Margaret Merrell Memorial Service

Christ Church, Susquehanna

The Rev. Canon Carol Horton

June, 2, 2007

“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs.”

“Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Tend my sheep.”

“Simon son of John, do you love me?” “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

This is a portion of the gospel from the third Sunday of Easter in year C; we heard it just a few weeks ago. It is also the gospel appointed for the feast day of St Peter and St Paul, coming up on June 29. It is part of a larger story: Jesus’ third post-resurrection appearance. Some of the disciples had decided to go fishing, no doubt as a way of dealing with their grief and uncertainty by doing something that was part of their usual pattern of life. And so these fishermen had gone fishing. But they caught nothing until a man on the shore told them to put down their nets again – this time there were a lot of fish, and they recognized that it was Jesus on the shore. So Peter threw on his clothes, jumped into the water and raced to shore. The others followed, and they had breakfast on the beach with Jesus. It is after this event, and after some time spent with Jesus telling them many things that we have this conversation

between Peter and Jesus.

“Do you love me? Feed my sheep.”

Three times the question is asked and answered. Perhaps a reminder of the three times that Peter denied knowing Jesus just before the crucifixion. Perhaps this was a way of canceling out those denials. Or perhaps it was a way of reminding Peter – and us – how easy it can be to say the words, and how difficult it may be to actually live them amidst the challenges of everyday life, and how much it may ultimately cost to follow Jesus.

Simon, son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Feed my sheep. Follow me.

This is not one of the gospels suggested for a funeral or memorial service, but it was the passage of scripture that stayed with me following the news of Margaret Merrell’s death. I generally like to follow the guidelines, and tried working with the gospels appointed, but none of them felt quite right. So after a great deal of prayer, I decided this was indeed the gospel to use for this occasion. And though it felt a bit like coloring outside the lines, I knew I was in good company.

We have gathered today to give thanks for the life of Margaret Merrell – daughter, sister, cousin, colleague, friend, musician, missionary, priest of the Church, Child of God. A woman who throughout her life not only colored outside the lines, but was known to move the lines when that was necessary. Like going to Eastman School of Music as a performance major at a time when women were only supposed to be Music Education majors. Or joining the Marine Corps so she could play in the band. Or being a “Hormel Girl:” part of the all-girl band paid by the Hormel Company to go around the country as an advertising gimmick for their meat products. Lots of companies had these bands, but Hormel was the only one to have an all-girl band. Margaret said she really liked the experience, but didn’t like handing out the meat samples in the breaks.

Do you love me? Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Follow me.

Margaret heard this question and call, and answered both in her own unique way. Her pushing of the boundaries would lead her to missionary work in Alaska as assistant to the bishop, and then to Indian reservations in Wyoming, where she accepted the call to become a deacon and vicar-in-charge. In the late seventies her path led to priesthood; she was one of the first wave of women ordained in the Episcopal Church, a real pioneer. She returned to Susquehanna County, to become rector of this parish and St. Mark's in New Milford – the first woman rector in the Diocese of Bethlehem. As it is so often for pioneers, and those who are the “first wave,” it was a call followed at great personal cost for Margaret. She did not give up or give in, but persevered to the end with grace, dignity and humility.

When I came to be rector in these two parishes, Margaret was the organist here at Christ Church. She was a good organist, but sometimes would get so emotionally involved with singing the hymns as she played that they would get slower and slower. I would have to say to her, “Margaret! We have to move it along!” There were hymns she liked and hymns she didn't like, and it was fairly easy to tell the difference. She wouldn't practice the ones she didn't like, which made for some pretty interesting Sunday mornings. Margaret had a good liturgical sense, and a pastoral sensitivity to events and seasons. The communion hymn for today is from “Wonder, Love and Praise” and was first used at the end of the service before I went on sabbatical for three months. “God be with you til we meet again;” a familiar text, set to a tune by Vaughan Williams that is compelling and sings well. It is a hymn that has become part of the life of this congregation, marking departures of various kinds. Though it was not on the official hymn list for my last Sunday as rector here, just a year ago, it became the postlude that day. Margaret's final gift to me.

For some the call to follow Jesus, to feed the sheep, leads to public recognition and high profile ministry. For others it leads to quiet service that may go largely unnoticed by the world, and may seem insignificant to many. This latter was Margaret's path, but it was in no way insignificant. As a predecessor, no priest could ask for anyone more gracious than Margaret. She never interfered, but would offer advice if I asked. And I never heard her utter an unkind word about anyone. She was a woman of great integrity, and took seriously the call to feed and tend the sheep in her care, with grace,

gentleness and generosity. She was a shy woman, and one of great humility. As I look at this congregation gathered, I know that Margaret would be overwhelmed and embarrassed that all of you are here, but I also know that she would be secretly pleased. And she would love the singing!

It is said that most preachers have one sermon that gets adjusted for different circumstances. I like to think I have a few more than that, but I find that for memorial services I usually end up in the same place. So here it is: Tell the stories. Tell the stories of Margaret's life as you knew her. Each person here knew her in a slightly different and unique way, and as close as we might have been, each one only knows a bit of this person, and none of us knows her as God knows her. But as we tell the stories we begin to put the pieces together, and are able to see more of the tapestry that was her life. We are able to come to know her a little more as God knows her. So tell the stories: the funny ones, the sad ones; tell of the times she filled you with joy, and the times she was exasperating beyond words. Tell of her triumphs and challenges, knowing all the while that she was a person who lived out her deep love for God and the call to follow Jesus as best she was able until the very end of her life. In the telling we not only learn of Margaret, but we learn of the power, grace and generosity of God's love and care. It is Margaret's continuing gift to us.

And for that we say, "Thanks be to God."