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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Third Sunday of Easter
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Lectionary Year C: John 21:1-19

Legendary Grand Forks, North Dakota journalist Marilyn Hagerty received some late-in-life recognition for her review of the local Olive Garden restaurant in a March, 2012 edition of the Grand Forks Herald. Her ability to unironically review a franchise restaurant first drew ridicule -- presumably for coming across as a backwater rube -- but later drew praise, which eventually led to the publication of her book Grand Forks: A History of American Dining in 128 Reviews having its foreword written by none other than Anthony Bourdain. Now 95 years old, we can presume that Marilyn's longevity could be explained by both the clarity -- and charity -- with which she has reviewed restaurants over the past several decades.

That said, if you've ever had the opportunity to dine at one of those pseudo-restaurants located in one of America's major airports, you've probably come to the conclusion that even the likes of Marilyn Hagerty couldn't find something nice to say about the overall dining experience. Allow me to sum that experience up in three simple points: (1) limited menu selection, (2) low quality, (3) very high price.

But they have you basically trapped until you've reached your final destination. Sure, you could leave the airport and find a decent place at which to dine, but that would involve getting yourself out of (and back into) a secure area in addition to the taxi fare or Uber fees and travel time to your restaurant of choice -- all of which would consume precious minutes that you probab-

ly don't have given your relatively brief layover and the necessary journey from the "B" concourse to the "F" concourse, which isn't exactly a hop, skip, and a jump to begin with.

So if you're anything like me -- unprepared -- you're stuck with some pre-packaged "entree," which, for the low, low price of \$17.99, was lovingly unwrapped and put in a microwave oven or an equivalent heating device -- and, before you know it, it's ready to serve. Oh, and you mustn't forget the equally overpriced beverages...but the bright side there is that at least their quality is up to snuff. The same cannot be said of the food!

I need not belabor my point, except to say that (typically) the food at your average major airport is little more than overpriced...well...crap.

There...I said it!

Granted, I used an extreme example here...yet one that reminds us, in many cases, that the vocation of putting food on someone's plate at the airport isn't a vocation at all. It's a business -- meant solely to minimize cost and maximize profit, even if it means price gouging because hungry travelers like me have no other choice apart from what's there.

Then we look at the Scriptures...in particular, to today's reading from the Gospel of John. I direct your attention to this farewell conversation between Jesus and Peter. Recall that the structure of the conversation intentionally reflects Peter's denial of Jesus -- three times Peter denied Jesus, so three times must he say "yes" to Jesus. But then there's the commission that Jesus puts before Peter. First, "Feed my lambs"; second, "Tend my sheep"; third,

"Feed my sheep" (21:15, 16, 17). Not surprisingly, perhaps, we're talking about food here! Peter is being entrusted with -- among other things -- the feeding of the flock, which is now the Body of Christ. Jesus' upcoming physical absence necessitates Peter's takeover of these duties. And, as you can imagine, this is a very sacred trust.

Indeed, this is the feeding with which Christ entrusted the Church. And here we are, almost two thousand years later, being fed by the same Christ in Word and Sacrament...knowing that Jesus' commission to Peter really stuck. We are the sheep who need to be fed regularly, and so we come here -- to the table, to the font, and to the pulpit -- to receive the precious food of Christ's grace. And folks, this isn't the overpriced crap that we force ourselves to choke down at the airport. No, this is Christ's free gift to us that brings us an eternal satisfaction (as opposed to momentary gastric distress).

May we know the difference between the two...

I say this because sometimes it appears -- in American Christianity, at least -- that the sheep have taken to grazing over at the airport, so to speak. Appetites have led people to the overpriced and unfulfilling array of "entrees" that start at \$17.99. Why? Because at first glance, they look appealing -- much more appealing than sitting in church for an hour! As things start returning to normal following two years of Covid-19, many have discovered an array of other things to do on Sunday mornings, besides church. I'm not talking about people who are cautious about going out and/or those who watch services online; rather, I'm talking about the nascent easing of God out of Sunday mornings altogether -- a development that is decades in the making but accel-

erated by the pandemic. Now, the trips to the waterpark, the mall, the casino, or the big game are as appealing as they ever were -- and are all places where you can drop a lot more than \$17.99 -- but, when all is said and done, is one's soul really in any better shape than if one had skipped all that and gone to church?

I'd say, "That's a question worth asking!"

It's a question worth asking because someone is trying to feed us, and if we're not there, we don't get what we need. Think of Jesus as he says to Peter, "Feed my sheep." A reliable shepherd was still needed to watch over the sheep...but these sheep -- the Church -- have a little sharper minds than the ordinary sheep that roam the pasture. They know the difference between the spiritual food and drink of Christ's precious grace and the \$17.99 "entree" that they choke down at the airport.

Let's not make Peter's job any tougher...

And we ourselves are being called by Jesus today. "Feed my sheep," he says, and feed not only those with spiritual hungers. Indeed, there are sheep who face poverty, starvation, sickness, homelessness, and destruction. We remember, therefore, our calling to reach out and our church's ministries both here and far away. We have a pretty good idea of what we do locally, and, if you look closely, you'll find that it -- for a church of this size -- is impressive. But let us remember, too, what can be done globally. Last week, I approved a \$500 donation of our Outreach funds to Episcopal Relief and Development for relief in Ukraine...a little action that seemed apropos following our

Service of Remembrance and Reflection to Honor Ukraine. These are ways and means by which we can take the words and deeds of Christ into the world...a sense and spirit of service that we always need in the Church.

But the most unshakable image of this farewell conversation between Jesus and Peter is of Jesus' initial question: "Do you love me?" Peter must've felt a bit of sting with that question...after all, no one would exactly like the implication of unfaithfulness in Jesus' words. But this was, after all, the person who denied him three times, so we know the logic at work here. And, naturally, we cannot help but imagine Jesus posing the same question to us. Do we love Jesus? Furthermore, are we willing to deal with the follow-up to that? That involves doing something...feeding his sheep, to be specific.

Actually, the One who died and rose again from the dead for us and for our salvation shouldn't be too hard to work for. All we need is a little food, a little help, and a little encouragement -- both to keep up the good work and to meet future challenges. But these are things that you can get right here, from me and from each other. We're doing nothing else other than sharing God's gifts in Word and Sacrament...gifts that are far more precious and satisfying than the high-priced, low-quality culinary disgraces of the airports of this world. And, better yet, each one of those gifts is free.

So if you ever find yourself at one of our nation's busier airports and you see the fine dining options before you, think of all the places in this world that are equivalent wastes of money...if not more so. But then, think of where you can go and be fed with food that is of so much greater value and of so much lesser price, because when you "dine" here, the price has already been

paid...by Christ himself.

How we cannot love him more is, after that, incomprehensible. He has loved us to the point of giving his own life...and even when we don't love him back, we are still his sheep and still get fed. May we never take that for granted.

In fact, may we love Jesus and treasure his precious gifts to us unto eternal life.

Amen.