

May 3, 2020

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Sermon Preached via Facebook Live

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Benicia

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

The Good Sheep

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. It pops up every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter so that we might have the opportunity to dive into what may be the most popular metaphor in Christianity: Jesus, the good shepherd. It has certainly got more razzle dazzle than Jesus, the gate for the sheep Sunday. Christian language is riddled with sheep and shepherds -- lamb of god, you take away the sin of the world, Peter, do you love me? Then feed my sheep. Some ministers refer to their congregations as their "flock." We think of Moses, who acts as a shepherd for the Israelites, corralling them from slavery to freedom. God, who shepherds them in the wilderness for 40 years.

The metaphor of the Good Shepherd has layers and layers built up through the bible, so it's a good practice to sit down with it once a year, after it has grown thick and unruly, shear it off from the body of scripture, and sort through and refine it a little bit so we can carry on with something more useful.

Metaphorically speaking, of course. It's a good and important thing to do. If you have short hair, this practice holds a special urgency for you during this pandemic. We long to be shorn by a good shepherd, and are cautiously eyeing our family members, wondering if we can trust them with the clippers.

But I digress. The point is, our work today is to look deeply at this metaphor that is so central to our faith and to see what it means for us today.

Our lectionary includes a beautiful description of the early Christian community, the most beloved psalm, and Jesus' comforting if somewhat confusing words in John. But it was the first letter of Peter that drew my eye this week, because our lectionary excludes one of the most controversial verses of scripture. That passage should begin with verse 18, "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." Depending upon your perspective, this omission is either wise, or cowardly. But I think we can all agree that it's uncomfortable.

The passage goes on to extol the virtues of enduring unjust suffering, saying that Christ's brutal death was an example, so that we should follow in his steps. After all, by his wounds we have been healed. It's a passage that, yes, at the very end, mentions a shepherd, but ultimately begs a question as thick and unruly as wool fresh off the sheep. How are we, as Christians, supposed to handle ourselves in the face of pure evil? How must we respond to authority, to power, and to abuse and suffering? What do we do when those forces are combined into a toxic cocktail that can only be called human sin?

In the passage from John, Jesus does, in his way, paint a picture of our world. We live within a system that has both good grass and dark valleys, and since we cannot know exactly what the contours of the landscape look like, we seek leaders to guide us. This is well and good, and would work flawlessly, except that there are thieves and bandits looking to lead us astray. There are masters who beat their slaves. There are authorities that cause us to suffer, who steal and kill and destroy. The writer of first Peter seems to be saying that we should accept all of this. Is that the Christian message, the way of life? To accept authority and the beatings that may come?

Look at the sheep in John's passage. They are not helpless, dumb, bleating animals who have no power or agency. They have the power to listen. They have the power to follow. "They will not follow a stranger," Jesus says. They follow the Good Shepherd because they know his voice.

If we find ourselves in danger or suffering unjustly in the face of sin, we must listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. We must figure out what path to follow, the one that leads to life and having it abundantly. We must find the way of Love, the right pathway that leads us beside still waters and revives our tired souls.

In a sermon this week, our presiding bishop said that “Love is the rubric of Christian life.” Rubrics are the texts in our prayer book that guide us in how we do our worship. Bishop Curry said that they tell us what must be done, what may be done. He said they limit us, and give us freedom, and require us to exercise our judgment. When love is the rubric, the ultimate standard against which all our decisions are measured, we are living a Christian life.

One of the rubrics above the prayers of the people says that “*any* of the forms may be used,” and adaptations may be made. St. Paul’s Benicia is the first church I have ever known that actually follows this rubric and empowers intercessors to adapt its prayers on a weekly basis. It’s a beautiful example of the rubrics giving us freedom.

One rubric that we break consistently is actually more than a rubric -- it’s a church canon. At St. Paul’s all are welcome to receive the sacrament of communion, yet official church policy limits that to the baptized. Along with thousands of other Episcopalians, you have listened for the voice of the Good Shepherd, held this up against the rubric of Love and determined that this is a rule to be disobeyed. This is an example of our community exercising our judgment.

So when we are confronted with the abuse of authority, with injustice and suffering and sin, we must listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. We must listen for the way of love. And we must pursue that path immediately and with all the strength we can muster. The thieves and bandits have gotten more sophisticated - they can disguise their voices to sound like love, when really, they’re speaking death and destruction. The Good Sheep hone their skills, practice following the way of love in all things so that when the thieves come,

they know the voice of the Good Shepherd so well that they hear him above the noise.

Perhaps it sounds to you like an unsatisfying or vague answer -- "listen for the voice of love in the face of abuse" -- but it's the most truthful one. It's the most Christian one. When we question obedience to authority, willingness to suffer, and masters who beat their slaves, love is the answer. Love can be silent suffering. It can be civil disobedience. It can be delighting in following the rubrics, or breaking a church canon. It's resistance. It's acceptance. It's all of these things. But as long as love is the only voice we listen to, we can trust that we are being led by the Good Shepherd, straight to the green pastures and the revival of our souls.

Amen.