

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year A

We raised sheep at Emmaus for nine years, and I found the sheep and lambs to be wonderful teachers. We had a group of four retired sisters that came for a week of retreat at Emmaus in the late 80s, and one of them spent several hours each day just sitting near the barnyard, watching the sheep and goats. She said it provided her a wonderful meditation. And once when my mom and my teenaged sister were visiting, mom had me take Karin out with me to see one of the ewes giving birth – with the hope that seeing what was involved in actually bringing new life into the world might...*better inform* the choices Karin might make in her dating life!

But one of the things about the sheep that I found most interesting was the interaction between the ewes and the lambs after birth. Once the lambs were born, their mothers began uttering sounds we had never heard from them before, as if motherhood had given them a new language – a strange cross between grunts and clicks, almost – eh, eh, eh... And in the barnyard, where several ewes would be wandering with their lambs strewn about, if a ewe began her eh, eh, talk, *her lambs*, and ONLY her lambs, would come running. They knew her voice, and she knew her lambs. That voice told the lambs to whom they belonged...it told them who they were, so to speak.

I've seen a lot of Andrew Cuomo on the news shows in the past several weeks – the Governor of New York – as have most of you, I imagine. He doesn't have a particularly ingratiating voice, to my ears. But I find myself *listening* to him these days – and apparently a great segment of the population listens to him. And I think one of the reasons folks are listening is because each time he speaks, despite the tenor of whatever news he may have about COVID-19, he *reminds people who they are*. He tells people they are New Yorkers – and then defines what that means – they are tough, they are resilient, and they are loving. He has freely admitted that he could lay out the best plans in the world, but if the people of New York were unwilling to follow, it would mean nothing. And then he goes on to add that the people of New York *care* about one another, that they pull together. He reminds them of who they are, and thus calls them to be their best selves.

When someone affirms us, when someone recognizes our best self, it is simultaneously a *call* to us to *continue* to live out of that center of who we are. It's as if they know our name, that they at the same time give us permission to be who we are, at our best.

That is what Jesus is talking about, when he likens himself to the Shepherd, who knows our names and who call us to follow. We *know* that voice. Sometimes it takes us a while. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in last week's gospel, sometimes our eyes and hearts are slow to open. But deep down, we *know* the voice of the Shepherd. It calls to something deep within us. "Were not our hearts burning within us?"

We recognize that voice, and like the ewe's voice to her lambs, it tells us to whom we belong. When we were baptized, we were signed with the cross with these words: "Child of God, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." There it is. At our baptism, we and all those gathered affirm that we are Christ's own. We belong to Christ. That is why we recognize the Voice of this Shepherd – because we belong to him.

Our first reading today from Acts follows immediately on the portion we heard last Sunday. Peter has preached a powerful sermon at Pentecost – and we were told then that about three thousand people were baptized that day. But as Mennonite Pastor Ryan Aulgrim says, if after their baptism, those people had just gone home, back to their lives as they had been, nothing would have happened, and there would be no "church" today. Aulgrim says, "What made the difference is what happened next." And that is where our reading today picks up. After those three thousand were baptized, this is what happened next:

"Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

If those words sound very familiar to you, they should. They form the very first promise in our baptismal covenant: "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?" And this Easter, and every Easter since we were baptized or received into this church, we have said, "We will, with God's help."

That baptismal covenant does for us what Governor Cuomo is doing for the people of New York. It reminds us who we are, and thus calls us – again and again – to BE that child of God, that person who belongs to Christ. Through our baptismal covenant, we are both affirmed and called. This is who you are, and this is how you are to live it out.

In that passage from Acts which we heard today, we are given the first real glimpse or description of the early church.

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

And why did they do these things? Because that’s what Jesus did. Jesus called together all sorts of people. He brought Pharisees and tax collectors and prostitutes, men and women, all to the same table. He saw who people really were, affirmed them, and called them by name to be their best selves. He called people to follow him, by living the way of Love that he lived.

And that’s what is at the heart of our baptismal covenant – our promise to follow the way of Jesus.

The problem, however, is that there are other voices out there. There are, to quote the Scripture, thieves and bandits. And as for us sheep – sheep can have a herd mentality. They will follow the lead sheep – often to their own peril – just because they have become followers.

My friend, the Rev. Robert Bond, had this to say: “Much as we may assert that we do not have a herd mentality, the truth is most of us function most of the time as a member of a herd. We have our shepherd, the voice we listen to and follow. It may be a political person or party, it may be a peer group, it may be professional leadership, and it may be a religious leader. We don’t have the time or the inclination to research every issue in our lives. We have our trusted source and we let them do the research and analysis so we don’t have to. The problem isn’t in having a trusted source to follow. The problem is when we haven’t done our

research on the motivation of the source. If we follow someone just because our family has always followed them, or because most of our friends follow them, or because they hold a position we have been taught to follow, then we can be led to our own destruction.”

By entering into our baptismal covenant, we have stated very clearly that it is our desire and intent, not to follow the herd, but to follow the Good Shepherd, to follow the way of Jesus. And the baptismal covenant tells us that means resisting evil, seeking and serving Christ in *all* persons, loving my neighbor as myself, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being.

Last week I said we need to ask ourselves, “When was my heart burning within me?” “Where has my heart been moved?” Sometimes lately I notice that my heart is burning when I see the tremendous suffering of others all around me, when I hear of things that are clearly unjust. That burning? I believe that kind of burning is also Christ present – reminding me of those baptismal promises.

It wasn’t Peter’s great sermon that got the early church off to its start. It isn’t facts or dogma that changes us. It is our coming together – in whatever ways we can find – to share the bread of our lives, to share the stories of how our hearts were burning, to help one another keep recognizing the voice of the One who calls us by name. This is what transforms us.

As we prayed in our Collect:

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

- [Acts 2:42-47](#)
- [1 Peter 2:19-25](#)
- [John 10:1-10](#)
- [Psalm 23](#)