

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B – Good Shepherd

Don't be sheep! Don't be sheep! - I think that phrase – that admonition – has been used on both sides of the political spectrum in the recent past – mostly in a derogatory fashion. Each “side” thinks that the people with whom they disagree are following blindly the “wrong” person or ideology. But today - this Fourth Sunday of Easter – is - affectionately or not - known as Good Shepherd Sunday. On this Sunday every year, the Lectionary brings us to Psalm 23, and the Gospel is always some portion from Chapter 10 of John's Gospel – where Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd. And that, my friends, puts *us* in the role of sheep. So in response to that admonition NOT to be sheep – I suggest that it's not being a sheep that is the problem – but listening to the wrong voices, following the wrong shepherd.

And how do we know what voice to listen to? How do we know the good shepherd from the bad? Our scripture readings for today are going to help us with that – but we have to “unpack” them first. -- You see, we're walking into the middle of a story already in progress in both the first reading from Acts and in the gospel passage from John for today. In both cases, we need to know what's happened *before* what we hear today to get a grasp of what's going on in the conversation.

In this section of John's gospel, Jesus and the Pharisees and other leaders have been sparring. Jesus – on the Sabbath -then heals a man who had been blind from birth, who survived by begging, and when the Pharisees question the man – and his family – about the healing, the man tells them that he only knows he was blind, and that Jesus healed him. The Pharisees insist that this cannot be from God - because Jesus did this on the Sabbath. When the man argues with them, they essentially call him a big sinner and a liar and throw him out of the synagogue community. When Jesus hears that he was thrown out, he goes after and finds him, and we are reminded of the parable about the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, yes? But the point is that the Pharisees are still present during all of this. And they want to know what Jesus thinks he is doing!

What we have in Chapter 10, then, is Jesus trying to explain. But this metaphor he uses – his statement that “I AM the Good Shepherd” – is a loaded statement. Because those Pharisees – and for that matter *all* the Jews listening to Jesus – are very familiar with the images of *God* as Shepherd in the scriptures. They know Psalm 23. They are aware of God speaking through *Isaiah* saying that the religious leaders have not shepherded the people rightly, to the point that God says, “I myself will shepherd them.”

So now – in our passage for today – Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd.” – and then goes on to talk about the hirelings – those hired hands who *abandon* the sheep when the wolf comes, those who do not *care* about the sheep. Two things are happening here: Jesus is critiquing the religious leaders of his day – for going along with the Roman authorities to keep their own power and abandoning the flock to be abused by those same Roman authorities. And Jesus is identifying himself with God in the role of the *Good Shepherd*.

It is no wonder that twice in this chapter we are told that they tried to arrest Jesus, that they tried to stone him. The “powers that be” in Jesus’ time did not *want* the Good Shepherd appearing in their midst, because they did not want the people – the poor, the disenfranchised, those *without* power, to follow him.

But follow they did. And that takes us to the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. In the preceding chapter, Peter and John come across a man who has been lame from birth – who begs for alms every day in the temple. And Peter tells him that he has neither silver nor gold, but he will give him something else – and then he heals him in the name of Jesus – which causes quite a stir. Lots of folks gather around, and listen to Peter tell about this Jesus. And that results in Peter and John being arrested. You see, they, *too*, were perceived as a threat to the powers that be – because they were following that Shepherd, carrying on the work of Jesus by spreading the Good News of God’s presence among the people, healing the sick, freeing the oppressed.

Why would that upset the religious and civil leaders so much? Because they – Jesus and his followers – are upsetting the *social order*. We should not miss the point that both figures who were *healed* – the man blind from birth that Jesus healed and the one lame from birth that Peter healed – were beggars. They were at the *bottom* of the social ladder. Their physical healing made it possible for them to enter fully into the life of the community, made it possible for them to use their gifts. They were made *whole*. And they were able to proclaim that Jesus – this Good Shepherd – had healed them. And they, too, began to follow the way of Jesus – the way of Love.

What Peter describes as “a good deed done to someone who was sick” was grounds for arrest to those in power. When *Jesus* heals the man born blind, the religious leaders say he is in violation of the Sabbath. There is inherent conflict, it seems, between living out the values of God – healing the sick, caring for the poor, liberating the captives – and being considered an evildoer by those in religious and civil authority.

Peter and John end up in jail. All the apostles, except for John, are murdered by the civil and religious authorities. Jesus was crucified as a criminal.

Yale theologian Willie James Jennings says this about these “criminal acts”:

“Real preaching and authentic teaching is inextricably bound to real criminality. Christians of the modern West have never really grasped our deep connection to the criminal mind, our mind. We should always understand ourselves as what Edward Said called secular critics who unrelentingly call into question the gods of this age, that is, the prevailing social, cultural, political, economic, and academic logics that support or are at ease with the status quo of grotesquely differentiated wealth and poverty, uneven access to the necessary resources for life and health, and forms of sublimely stubborn oppression masked inside social conventions.”ⁱ

The point I want to make here is that, yes, we are sheep – committed to following the Good Shepherd – who will lead us by restful waters and give us good pasture – and who will *be* with us in the shadow of death, and in the presence of “those who trouble us” – but who also leads us to laying down our lives – for that is what Jesus modeled for us.

It’s all there in the first letter of John – which many view as a commentary on John’s gospel. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

We usually think of Jesus laying down his life as literally laying down his life on the cross – and so when we hear that we, too, are to lay down our lives, we might want to dismiss that. Which of us might really be called to sacrifice our life for someone else? - Actually, it’s more common than we might want to think – both in the past and in our own day. The school teacher or coach who shields his students and dies from a gunshot. The persons in the civil rights movement who were killed for standing up for the rights of *all* people. The churches that are burned or vandalized because they dared to speak truth to power or to stand against injustice. If we really want to follow this Jesus, we must know there may be consequences, yes?

But “lay down one’s life” is most often much more mundane than that. And First John cuts right to it: “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” Laying down my life means laying down, letting go, of the notion that my life, my concerns, should be my only priority. Laying down

my life may be as simple of letting go of my preference for what we'll have to eat for dinner and letting the kids choose. Or it may be as complex and difficult as taking a stand for what I know is right when I know others will disagree and might think less of me for it. Laying down my life may mean going to visit someone who's alone when I'd rather watch the baseball game on Saturday afternoon. Laying down one's life means finding a way to make the love of God *real*, a way to put the *Love that is God* into the *flesh in action* that is you.

We are each and all called to be the shepherd, you see. We heard Jesus say at the end of this morning's gospel passage, "I have received this command from my Father." And just two weeks ago, on the second Sunday of Easter, we heard him say, in this same Gospel, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And so we are each and all called to be shepherd.

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" How, indeed?

Let us look at Psalm 23 this week. Let us see who the good shepherd is, who we are called to be. Do something for those who are "in want." Be a calming presence for those who long for still waters. Revive the souls of our friends. Be a companion on the journey with those walking difficult paths through sickness or grief. And spread a table of kindness for those who are troubled, and maybe even for those who trouble us. Then we can trust that goodness and mercy will follow us. Then we will be dwelling – we will be abiding – in love, in God, and God in us.

May it be so. Amen.

- [Acts 4:5-12](#)
- [1 John 3:16-24](#)
- [John 10:11-18](#)
- [Psalm 23](#)

ⁱ Willie James Jennings. *Acts* (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 45-46. Jennings refers to Said's *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 88-89.