

**Easter 4  
April 22, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the spirit.  
Amen.**

You may have already noticed, but this Sunday's lessons, and much of our music this morning, contain references to sheep and/or shepherds. The prime example is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which we just recited, and the Gradual Hymn before the reading of the Gospel was a paraphrase of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. In the Gospel of John Jesus refers to himself as the "Good Shepherd," and the Choir Anthem after this sermon, as well as the Offertory Hymn, the Choir Anthem at Communion, and our closing hymn are all references to sheep and or shepherds. Just so you get the point ... Guess what? Today is known as "Good Shepherd Sunday!"

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is very comforting to many people. Illustrations ... such as the one on the cover of the bulletin ... of a shepherd carrying a lamb around his neck; or the idea of the shepherd looking for his lost sheep; or the shepherd who knows each of his flock by name; or the shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep ... and all the other shepherd and sheep images ... warm our hearts and souls. But, remember, they are all metaphors, and if you carry the metaphor too far the images can be dirty and bloody and scary. So, I'm not going down that path. However, I will offer a challenge to the image of passive sheep completely dependent upon the shepherd, and instead look at how we might be transformed to being active agents of wholeness in this world.

In this morning's reading from the Gospel of John we hear that the Good Shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. Then, in the First Letter of John we hear:

*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?*

During this Easter season, for our Second Reading, we have been hearing selections from this First Letter of John. The Letters of John are different from the Gospel of John. There are three Letters of John ... the Second Letter of John is only 13 verses long, and the Third Letter of John is only 15 verses long. And, although scholars are undecided as to whether the author of this exhortation is the same as the author of the Gospel of John, it is obvious that this writing comes from the community that had formed around this disciple, and there are constant echoes of the Gospel of John throughout.

This First Letter of John is not really a letter, but more of an encouragement to a community that was divided and in conflict. The content of the disagreement was the debate over the true nature of Jesus ... was Jesus human, or was he divine? Because of this disagreement the

community was fractured and people were angry at each other. Leaders on both sides of the issue vied for followers. Thus, the purpose of the First Letter of John ... whoever wrote it, and to whatever community that received it ... the purpose was to proclaim the true faith: Jesus, the divine Christ, lived as a human being. In other words ... Jesus was both human and divine.

The First Letter of John contains familiar descriptions of our faith:

*This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.*

Yet, beyond the declarations of the faith is an unmistakable call to act with integrity in that faith:

*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before [God].*

And, remember, in the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and then tells them to, "Love one another as I have loved you." Again, this is echoed in the First Letter of John:

*And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.*

Among the images of sheep and shepherds it is this call to living the truth, AND taking action, that we heard read this morning. If this is what Jesus would do for us, in the name of a loving God, then that is what we are called to do for others through our faith in that same loving God. It is not about what we say, but about what we do. Again, in the words of the First Letter of John:

*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

This is about taking seriously what Jesus took seriously.

This is as true for us today in this community of faith as it was for that community to whom this letter was written almost 2,000 years ago. So, you may ask, what is the problem? St. Cyprian's is a community where we all believe the same thing, don't we? And certainly all the people of this congregation love one another, isn't that true? I think we would like to believe that the answer to both questions is "Yes!" However, what we would like to believe, and the reality of the truth, are not always the same. In reality the answer is "No!" and "No!" No, we do not all believe the same thing, as some of you have made clear to me. And, no, St. Cyprian's is not a community where everyone loves everyone else. I hate to say it, but that, too, has been made clear to me. However, I imagine that it is a very rare community of faith where everyone truly believes the same thing, as if there was a monolithic expression of the faith. And, I also have my doubts about a community of any sort where everyone claims to have a sincere love for everyone else.

Do the people of St. Cyprian's all believe the same thing? I don't think so! As I said, some of you have made it very clear to me that your faith and beliefs differ from mine ... more than once I have been called a heretic. But it is not the first time I have been called a heretic, and I doubt it will be the last, and I admit that my beliefs sometimes fall outside of "orthodoxy." And, does everyone at St. Cyprian's love everyone else at St. Cyprian's. I wish that were true, but the answer is no. We are human, and all too often there are limits and conditions put on our love for others. Instead of responding with a charitable spirit to the other when they fail to live up to our expectations, we react with judgment. Instead of empathy and understanding we turn a deaf ear of apathy. Instead of listening with a curious heart, we spend our spiritual energy devising a winning argument.

So, if that is true, then what does that mean for us today? That is exactly what the First Letter of John is addressing. Jesus was both human and divine. However, there are those who confuse worshipping the divine with participating in the reality of Jesus' human teaching. The scripture today enjoins us to love one another. And, elsewhere, we are commanded to love even our enemies. It challenges us to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. Presumably, the "one another" we are to love is not just our best friends and family but also those who have hurt us, betrayed us, misused or abused us. We are commanded to love ... love unconditionally.

Somewhere in my reading I came across the insight of how much we get out of our resentments. When someone hurts us through betrayal, deceit, or abuse, they hurt us not once, but for a long time. Yet, there is something about us that enjoys dredging up old hurts. We talk about them to other people. In loving detail we reiterate the specific ways in which the other offended us. We feel righteous in our anger, and we love our furies and our rage. If we didn't we would give them up.

All of us have been hurt at one time or another in our lives. Often the hurt is most painful when it comes from someone we are close to, someone we respect, someone we trust. It becomes hard not to obsess about the pain they have caused us, the abuse they have inflicted, the betrayal of our trust. We feel justified in our anger, even righteous in our rage. Once someone has truly, undeniably wronged us, then we feel as if all moral bets are called off. We feel free to abuse this person anyway we want ... at least in our minds and hearts.

But to do so is to make ourselves even more of a victim. The author of the First Letter of John tells us that there is another way ... love one another. This means that when we are wronged, all moral bets are definitely NOT called off. In fact, according to this ethic, it is precisely when we are used spitefully and wrongfully that the true challenge of our faith begins. In the midst of the anger it may seem ludicrous, but God is calling us to love the other.

The Christian faith makes the stunning demand that we love one another ... including those we might like to think of as our enemies. In order to love every one of those others in our community, in the world, and even in our families we must attempt to see their lives lovingly,

with charity, with a generosity of spirit, and show our determination to love them no matter what.

In this Easter season we proclaim the risen Lord ... the one who died on the cross on Good Friday and whose Resurrection we proclaim so that we might know that there is new life after death. That proclamation of our faith is meant to be more than mere words ... indeed, it is a way of life. Once more, in the words of the First Letter of John:

*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.*

Amen.