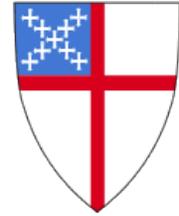


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Year C
RCL



Acts 9:36-43
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30
Psalm 23

Happy Mother's Day! And Happy Good Shepherd Sunday!

There is so much richness in our scriptures today. We give special emphasis to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The great protector who gives us direction so we can be fed, led to water, and to rest. This metaphor holds out our need to trust in God. To follow The Way that is given by Jesus.

In our lesson today, we see him walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon, talking to believers and non-believers alike. The timing is significant. It is the feast of the Dedication, or Hanukkah as we know it, is when the Jews celebrate the re-sanctification of the temple after being defiled almost 200 years before this day. It is a time that they are reminded of the special relationship they hold with their God. It is a time of high emotions, and the Jewish leaders are on guard against pretenders who claim to be the messiah. Any such claim, in their eyes, increases the danger of Rome destroying their way of life.

They are so on guard that they are missing the miracles that are happening before their eyes. They are so filled with disbelief that they have no room to hear and see God at work before them.

When they demand Jesus admit to them that he is the messiah, he knows the danger of clearly announcing his status as the son of God. He uses the metaphor of the shepherd, explaining that his life and actions are proof enough. That if the questioners were of his flock, they would hear and know his message. There would be no challenge, no danger for himself or his followers. And there would be salvation for all who heard and understood.

At the same time he is speaking cautiously to those that wish him harm, he is giving his followers, including us, a message of love and acceptance. It is our need to love ourselves, to see ourselves as worthy of God's love, and the abundance and peace that is offered by life with Jesus. So often we just can't accept that we are enough, just as we are.

Have you heard the story that God couldn't be everywhere at once, so he invented mothers? I see mothers, and fathers too, as our human shepherds when we are children, and often even after we've grown up. They offer direction, advice, and

discipline. God offers these as well. In their, or our, roles as parents, we can give and receive assurance that while it is good to be the best we can, we are exactly what God wants us to be.

Sheep always need direction. They need help to find food, water, and need to be guarded and guided to avoid danger. As children, we need that direction as well. The shepherd uses the rod and staff to give direction, a tap here, a tap there. The shepherd's crook has a hook at one end, just the right size to catch a lamb or a sheep and pull it back from danger. A good shepherd doesn't use these tools to abuse the sheep, but to guide them. Spare the rod spoil the child changes its meaning if you think of the shepherd's rod used as a tool to guide and protect. Lots of direction, correction done as loving guidance with a firm but gentle touch.

The sheep know the voice of the shepherd. Flocks of sheep may be mixed to share a paddock for the night, but need to be quickly sorted out into their own flock to go to pasture early in the day. The sheep recognize the voice and calls of their shepherd. They trust their own shepherd to lead them to food, water, and safety. Parents and kids know each other's voices. When we were kids, our family had a signal, a low two-toned whistle, that we would use to call out to each other where a loud voice would be inappropriate. We often would use that call in a store to let

our family know where we were. And we could hear that whistle anywhere in the store, and find our parents or anyone who knew the signal. I taught that to my children, and we used it for years as they grew up. We knew the voice of the shepherd.

Jesus talks to the Jewish leaders about how the people of his flock recognize his voice. They follow him because they know him. As they join the community, they know who he is, and know his message. They believe in him. But those who choose not to hear Christ's teaching, cannot hear the welcome and love in his voice. They do not recognize him as their shepherd.

Several of us went to the "Invite, Welcome, Connect" workshop offered by the diocese last Saturday. It was a day well spent. We explored many ideas about how we provide a welcoming place for God's children to offer our gifts. There was discussion about how we have a tendency to keep our church, and our church life, well kept secrets. There were some really fun videos that the speaker used to illustrate our reticence to invite others to join us here.

Starting last Sunday, you were introduced to an idea that our group decided to try, entitled "let's all enter through the front door." It is a way that we can invite those going by to join us. We are showing the way into the church!

For me it recalls the time when everyone walked to church. We must have had a parking lot, but I don't remember our family ever using it. Sunday mornings, we joined the whole town walking to whatever church we attended. So now I invite you to join us in this gesture. We can gather on the side walk on these beautiful spring days, and make it clear that we are coming together as the community of Christ, here in this place, and that everyone is welcome.

This community is one of the most loving, and welcoming, that anyone could ask for. We embrace those who are just like us, and those who are not. When ever I talk with people who are a lot smarter than I am, who are engaged with the larger church, they believe that the church as it is now will be non-existent sometime in the near future.

But, you know, I think that it is the love we have for each other that is the life's blood of the church. We may return to the home churches that were prevalent in Christ's time. We may have congregations that only gather together in large numbers a few times a year, or at times of grief or joy. And the rest of the time, we gather as smaller groups.

I know that if we follow Jesus teaching, we are told to be there for each other. We will always reach out both when we can offer help, and when we need it.

The Holy Spirit will take care of the church. We only need to follow. Trusting our shepherd, and loving each other.

Amen