

## OUR NEED OF THE SHEPHERD

### Year B, Easter 3: Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Our readings for this Fourth Sunday of Easter remind us that Christian discipleship may not be quite as we know it.

The excerpt from the Book of Acts shows two of Jesus' disciples, Peter and John, going head-to-head with the religious authorities at the temple in Jerusalem, the same religious authorities who handed over Jesus to be crucified. Peter, especially, is a disciple on fire. In Jesus' name, he has just healed a man lame from birth who sat daily asking for alms at what was called the Beautiful Gate at the temple. Everyone knew this man, including the religious authorities and Sadducees who were calling Peter and John to account for continuing where Jesus left off. Peter does not back down: he not only testifies to Jesus' resurrection, he proclaims Jesus as God's plan of salvation for all people. Were it not for their huge following – Luke says that 5,000 in Jerusalem alone counted themselves as Jesus' post-Pentecost disciples – Peter and John would not have been released by the chief priest and his company.

Psalm 23, used in part on this Sunday to complement the account from Acts, likens God to a faithful shepherd who will lead home the exiles from Babylon. It is reasonable to expect that this return journey when it happens will not be unlike the wilderness experience of their forebears. They fear starvation, dehydration, and attacks from marauders; but they will be safe, the psalmist announces, because God will keep them so. Just as the ancestors were protected through their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, so the exiles returning from Babylon will be like sheep whose every need is met by the Good Shepherd, their God. They will lie camp in green pastures, find water they can drink and wash in, and walk on a safe and direct route, those right pathways the psalmist mentions.

And yes, it seems as if Peter and John received a similar kind of shepherding in the temple that day when they appeared before Annas, Caiaphas, Jonathan, and the members of the Sanhedrin. It is no coincidence that this psalm has been appropriated by Jesus' disciples throughout the history of the church whenever our faith has been challenged. Our Gospel today connects Jesus himself with this psalm.

Today's Second Reading suggests that the discipleship of its readers is lukewarm. The apostle, writing in the tradition of John the evangelist, speaks at length in this letter of the necessity of love and the power of love in Christian discipleship, but then writes of the quality of the love that *Jesus* proclaimed with his very life. "We *know love* by this," the author writes, "that [Jesus] laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Interestingly, it is not martyrdom that the apostle is advocating, it is sacrificial love – love that has those with worldly goods use them to benefit a sister or brother in need. And lest we miss the point and only pay lip service to what we now understand to be a metaphor – laying down one's life as a description of sacrificial love – the author admonishes readers not to love in "word or speech," but rather "in truth and action." No halfway measures! Discipleship means placing ourselves on the line for the sake of another's wellbeing. Doing so, the apostle teaches, has us embody Jesus and gives us communion with Jesus: "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them," writes the author of I John.

In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus describe not only the quality of his love and commitment to his disciples in his image of the good shepherd – "*I am* the good shepherd," he says – but also criticize his adversaries, the temple and religious authorities, likening them to the "hired hand who does not care for the sheep." It is a scathing condemnation, but only underlines his seriousness concerning "laying down his life" – in this case, literally – for the sake of the sheep, his disciples.

All four readings speak against compartmentalizing our Christianity, keeping it safely locked away between Sundays and then taking it out each Lord's Day for a little spit and polish. "Truth and action," the author of I John writes, are what the Christian community needs if we are to demonstrate the authenticity and integrity of our life in Christ Jesus.

What is difficult is that we like to be comfortable. We like the option of being Christians on Sunday because it's pleasant. We meet with the like-minded and affirm one another in our choices and beliefs. We are nurtured by the good vibes of our congregational community, the familiar readings, prayers, and

sweet music. We support the church financially, and feel good about the programming that extends into the wider community. We love our church and we love one another.

But there's not much sacrifice when we look closely. And there's no real conflict with temporal authority. We have a few prophets in our midst who take on City Hall occasionally, but mostly we go along with the way things are, because they're not that bad, really – for us. “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 to help?” the author of 1 John asks. “Little children...” [why is he calling us “little children”?] “...let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Truth – as in speaking “truth” to power; action – as in doing hands-on ministry and advocacy for those in need. Are we “little children” because our faith has not yet matured to the seven-days-a-week, truth and action stage? Is our growth in discipleship stunted because we like being comfortable? (I'm tempted to re-read Pierre Berton's *The Comfortable Pew*, written in 1965, to examine its critiques for their current application.)

At the very least, may I suggest that we invite the Good Shepherd home with us today? Put him up in the guest room, and have him share all our meals? Take him with us to work tomorrow, and when we go shopping later in the week? Take him with us when we go to class or go to hockey practice at the arena? He's a little hard to live with, because he sees things that need fixing; he sees people who need our friendship and care; he champions causes we would rather ignore; he goes head-to-head with people who have no social conscience and a lack of moral courage; he sees people who are lonely and sits down with them for a visit; he shows us worthy causes that need our money; he puts our name on volunteer lists of organizations we admire but have never served in. He's no trouble, really; he's the perfect guest. But he's all about truth and action, and laying down our lives for one another, and training us – to be good shepherds in a world of scattered sheep. The shepherd's name is Jesus, and his ways are gospel.