

ACTS 2:42-47

PSALM 23

I PETER 2:19-25

JOHN 10:1-10

Fourth Sunday of Easter; Sunday of the Good Shepherd

April 30, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Shepherding, Day by Day!

That was then! This is now! Growing up in the South there were a whole lot of independently minded, non-mainline, denominational churches that boldly and proudly proclaimed that their ultimate goal was to perfectly and uniformly mold themselves according to the New Testament, naively, but understandably assuming there was only one original model. Spoiler alert! There was not! The Christian scriptures give us different flavors, speaking in tongues a quintessential example, definitely revealing a new twist in evolving and innovative worship styles! These strict fundamentalist churches, usually of the King James Version persuasion, though without conformity or uniformity, strived to copy practices in words believed to be frozen in time, set in stone! These latter day faithful seek to fully emulate, substantially mirror first century ecclesial practices. It seems somewhat reasonable but in reality is inconceivable, incomprehensible, and yes, is simply not even remotely possible! It simply cannot be done! This trend is especially so with congregations loosely affiliated with the fundamentalist Churches of Christ, never to be confused with the progressively liberal minded United Church of Christ, our own wonderful denominational home. These sectarian local churches went so far as to prohibit, to absolutely forbid, any musical instruments in their worship because proponents correctly claimed that no instruments are mentioned in these texts, nowhere to be found among the earliest gathered believers who secretly met in homes. This fact alone made possessing musical instruments a logistical improbability if not impossibility, no way an indication or verification that tune making implements were unacceptable. After all, no doubt most instruments were the property of the Temple or synagogues! Besides, these stationary cultic pilgrims had sold everything they owned and this would have included the musical instruments they would shortly no longer need! Last one out bring the harp and lyre! Not! How would you get them if you did not already have

them? Duh! The irony of this recently conceived and concocted instrumental abstinence is that the early church in its first century manifestation, not surprisingly, continued to model its worship after the familiar liturgy found in the temple and in the synagogues, only adding a few noteworthy additions such as the Eucharist and the Agape meal. **The funny part of this claim to follow what are perceived to be exact patterns that many naively believe to be one, and only one, early Church worship form, one solitary formula only, is that none of these folks in myriad diversely worshipping contemporary settings, from the nineteenth century until today, operating now in our present age, ever agreed to sell all their possessions and live together in a Christian commune the way the faithful did in the model we examine in today's lection from Acts, an exploration that indeed raises far more questions than answers. That would be job one, first thing! The earliest Christian community, or communities, were committed to unloading, to offloading, everything they owned, truly representing perhaps the earliest and purest form of communism, lower case "c". That loaded term always gets our attention, a word carrying the sum total of oppressive values that always raise our American hackles! The wacko folks who have carried out this kind of nonsense throughout history we quickly are polite to brand as sectarian aberrations, but more accurately are labeled as cults. We generally outright dismiss them as completely and totally wackadoodle nuts! If this lection from Acts was and is demanding that we sell all we have, give away every possession, and live together communally, then we are in some serious trouble! Now I know we all may really like one another, but really! The Bible was never intended to be used in such a pedestrian, ridiculous, simplistic, manner! How is that for a sermon introduction today? That was then! This is now!**

In today's lection from the early Church in the Christian scriptures in the Book of Acts, our best historical account documenting early Christian practices, we find a huddled mass of what surely was a small number of Jesus' followers gathered privately in one accord in this anonymous home, the very first house church, not-so-safely secluded from the rest of the world, specifically, the Roman part of it! All these recommitted, reenergized, and reorganized disciples had quickly become recluses, hermits, living in faith and fear, sequestered from the cares of the world in their own little hermitage, all of them waiting for what they anticipated, expected, to be a quick return of the risen one, Jesus, their knight in shining armor riding gallantly back to earth on a white horse coming back to get them all, to rescue them from the oppressor, and deal righteously and judiciously with their occupying enemies. Now known as the *Parousia*, they were living in what I love to call delusional deniability, having drunk the bad

theology espoused by some early believers, their fantasy filled words unfortunately becoming part of the Canon of the Christian scriptures, forever recorded in the book of books we call the Bible. In other words, we are stuck with these apocalyptically graphic texts which served as words of warning masquerading as comforting, each one foretelling of a foreboding Armageddon showdown predicted and predicated on a lot of faulty assumptions. Ever since, we have been left to deal with the aftermath, forced to deconstruct, to reinterpret, a mythology that has become a cottage industry peddling the horrific images associated with “rapture” theology, a word that, like “Trinity”, appears nowhere in the biblical narrative. Of course, this is not a sermon dedicated or devoted to such musings. We have better things to do and discuss! But, all this background serves as the context for what was going on in the minds of these faithfully hopeful but deeply misguided members of the early Church now cloistered, isolated in fear, yes, their legacy fortunately and unfortunately still ours, still with us, today.

To kill the suspense, spoiler alert, after 2000 plus years we know that these prognosticators of fantastical things to come were mistaken, flat out wrong. We are now fully and soberly aware that even vainly attempting to copy, to emulate or imitate, the patterns describing the early Church as portrayed here in Acts is a nonsensical exercise in futility, an impossibility the results of which are not remotely conducive to a productive life, abundant in every way, as we carry out the Great Commission, the mission and ministry of Jesus and his gospel. So, with that being said and at least with some level of agreement being acknowledged, the question becomes, “what do we now do with these ancient protocols that have become a contemporary dilemma for all of us who seek to fulfill the Great Commission, including Jesus’ mandate that we offer cups of cold water, that we feed, quench, clothe, and visit, bringing hope to the widows and orphans of our day, any and all who live on the fringes of society, the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and marginalized, no matter the status of their accumulated wealth?” As followers of Jesus we know beyond a shadow of all doubt that we are all called to be the advocates for people of every race and tribe, all the peoples now roaming the earth who create this multi-cultural human tapestry woven into the fabric of every nation, continuing to be a voice with and for women, people of color, and people of every beautiful sexual orientation. Yes, believe it or not, this short lection from Acts indicates some clear instructions, giving us a roadmap, a door or window, a pathway into the ways we are divinely instructed to meet the ginormous needs that face the human species now confronting all of us in this contemporary, postmodern, intellectually curious, critically thinking, twenty-first century world, a global village desperately

needing an infusion of the mercy and peace, the gracious goodness of God's love as revealed and reflected in the most unselfish human who perfectly embodied, reflecting the very presence of God. It is no small task we are assigned! No small thing we do! The questions are, "Are we up for it? Do we have the capacity? Are we capable?" As always, the answer is a resounding "YES" with God's help, led by the Spirit, God's constant gracious love abiding within and among us.

In today's Witness from the Epistles the writer of I Peter tells his reader that suffering is just fine as long as we endure patiently a steadfast faith, albeit dripping with human misery. This faithful servant was writing in the shadow of Jesus' suffering on the cross and amidst the vortex of the horrific persecution that followed, the atrocities associated with abject terror and torture, the inglorious, glorious, martyrdom that was awaiting so many of Christ's followers as they lived in the anxiety of every stressful moment. Once again, these were words that were intended only for that current or present audience. These words should have been frozen in time! Sadly and unfortunately, these linguistic musings became local vernacular as they circulated the early Church world, eventually, perhaps inevitably, becoming holy writ that is now erroneously used as a biblical blueprint, a paradigm, depicting what should be our agonizing expectations. This opinion is so off track, so missing the mark in relation to our current context. These biblical musings were never intended to be used as a rubberstamp, an imprimatur dictating our realities as a people who know we will be here as we follow our Christ-consciousness, always striving to alleviate pain and suffering and injustice in the world. As with today's reading from Acts we must be about the task of reimagining, reimagining, yes, reinterpreting as we dare define a different pathway, charting a new course of understanding, realizing the amazing capacity and opportunity with alternatively different applications. We have to be! As my friend Jill Bierwirth declares, "The miracle of scripture is not found in inerrancy or infallibility. Rather, the miracle of scripture lies in its ability to speak a new word for a new day, in a new way, each and every time we turn to it!" We cannot, must not, be stuck in the rut of those who came before us, not should we be! Once again, our job is to be about the task of uncovering meanings that fit today and that means coming to the Christian consensus that we will commit to alleviate suffering whenever and wherever we find it in every conceivable, possible, way imaginable, our task at hand to embolden and empower everyone to have the opportunity to live life to its fullest. It does not mean circling our own wagons as an insular band of believers afraid to encounter and engage the world beyond our walls. That was the sad lot of our predecessors whose story we read today. Their real time cannot be our real time!

None of us are called to wallow in constant anger lamenting the futile ways that abject misery oft finds its way to our doorstep, even in the way our forerunners waited patiently and impatiently for a relief that never came. Yes, many of them would die an excruciatingly catastrophic death, executed because of their faith. That was then! This is now!

Yes, suffering is real in the world, in our world. We have seen the plights of humanity at its worst, some by virtue of happenstance, the laws of nature invading our space and insulting our lives. We have seen and continue to see manifest within and among nations, observing the very worst that human beings can inflict one upon another, atrocities of the most horrific and unconscionable kind. History is full of these episodic nightmares and remains a constant reality, a continuous threat to civilization and the quest for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. None of us, however, no one anywhere, should have to settle for a life devoted to wallowing in misery, poverty, or oppression, living that is not, that is less than, that is devoid of meaning and peace and harmony, and yes, a measure of prosperity, all the basic blessings intended for everyone. Living the Christian life as followers of Jesus does come with risks, all the risks associated with taking up the crosses that are ours and ours alone, but a healthy Christianity advocates for living life to its fullest, to every person reaching their potential as uniquely gifted and talented, that we become all that we can be while “wastefully loving” as much as we can. Yes, I am invoking an image made popular by the late John Shelby Spong, who, other than Jesus, no one has said it better, more succinctly, and clearer. The early church left a legacy calling for suffering as an endearing trait, a sign of faithfulness, the monastic movement with its many orders, both then and, thankfully, much less now, modeling what it meant to suffer the sacrifices of unfulfilled emotional and physical wants and desires. That was then! This is now!

This morning we must reconsider, fully examining, yes, recalibrating and retrofitting, what it means to be the sheep of God’s pasture today, right now in our context, our real time, what it means to live in obedience, to seek righteousness, a life always elevating all of us, everyone, all the time, every time. At the same time our goal is to make life the joyous journey, the most exciting ride, that God intended it to be from the very foundations of the universe when God proudly, perhaps boldly, declared that creation was not just “good” but was “very good,” including humanity, yes, you and me. All creation is a divine playground, a playful habitat designed for our enjoyment but framed with much accountability and responsibility in this misinterpreted dynamic the Bible in Genesis calls “dominion!” Yes, we are the sheep of God’s pasture and this

pasture we inhabit is the most amazingly magnificent home we could ever imagine. And yes, our job is to take these precious gifts we have been given, multiply them, and even make them better! For we too have been imbued with the creative spark and Spirit of the Divine, co-creators in this vast biosphere that is ours to behold. What a sacred gift! What a sacred trust! What a blessing, then and now!

It is a colossal waste of time attempting to recreate the early Church, yes, to attempt to mimic a first century organization that was very disorganized, the very institution, established on the shakiest and most short term, temporal, of grounds. Knowing what we know is contained in the Bible, we learn that sometimes being biblical is not in our best interest but is the worst thing we can do! The modus operandi by the ecclesial trailblazers who managed what amounted to a very green infant congregation was a means to an end that never became what they firmly believed it would. They would not recognize any Christian church today! To attempt to recreate their wheel is an irrelevant exercise in futility, a waste of time and energy. They did not believe they would be there long, and their behavior and belief modeled that dynamic, a hope and dream that was eventually, yes, inevitably, dashed! Yes, our forebears, our forefathers and foremothers, in the faith paved the way forward for us as we now proudly and gratefully stand on their shoulders, the “great cloud of witnesses,” as the writer of Hebrews calls them, sheep one and all. But none of them would desire, would advocate, for us regressing, devolving, into their vulnerably compromised world of cruelty, execution, and martyrdom. Our path to sainthood is a far different course from theirs! Like our parents, grandparents, and all our familial relations before us, they want better for us. They desire that our faith, our commitment and fidelity, our work for social justice, be far more, be far more successful, fulfilling, and rewarding, far more productive, than anything they ever imagined or could achieve. To use an image from the Book of Exodus, once ordered by the Pharaoh to the Hebrew slaves, these threatened biblical characters of Christian persuasion were forced to make bricks without straw. Folks, unlike them, we have all the straw we need to carry out our calling, the commandments of our commissioning. We are fully equipped, as the Epistle writer of Ephesians (4:12-13) notes, to do the work of ministry. We can fulfill mission in ways that those church newbies who came before us could never have fulfilled in their limited capacity, the finite world in which they lived and moved and had their being. We are not that! We have unlimited resources! That was then! This is now!

And yet with all that being said, we have been, are and will continue to be, the sheep of God's pasture, maintaining a level of dependence, by choice, that comes with knowing that day by day, day after day, we walk by faith and not by sight and that by the grace of God go us all as we go about the business of being ourselves and living this amazingly abundant life. It is a fulfilling choice we make when and as we submit ourselves to the way of Christ Jesus, finding these pathways the best avenues for life and living, the most rewarding of approaches we have found as guideposts that lead us, urging us for how we choose to live and move and have our being. Sometimes I fear that the image of sheep is not the best animal metaphor available, making us human beings and doings seem like lemmings, helpless creatures incapable of autonomy or independence. It is a reminder that every metaphor is flawed, has its limitations, can become a stumbling block rather than a life-giving, emboldening and empowering, imagery. Once again, these motifs were written against the backdrop of immediate demise, the short shelf life that existed among these trailblazers in the early Church. While we may consider ourselves sheep with a shepherd, the Good Shepherd wants nothing less from us than to grow and mature and become responsible shepherds of our own lives, shepherding one another as we are accountable to each other and to God, shepherds in our own lives. There is balance at play in this holy tension, neither polarity acceptable nor desirable by the God who created us and set us free to live life abundantly, mirroring Jesus, the human one who reflected the very loving nature of the One he called Abba, Father, heavenly and eternal parent.

In this earliest recorded expression of the ecclesia, this earliest manifestation of the Church in its fledgling form, from its very foundation, these anticipatory and expectant congregants met every day for worship, living day by day in a world that really was day to day! Aren't we all? While we do not meet every day, for obvious reasons, indeed, day by day, day after day, we shepherd one another as we seek to follow the Good Shepherd, the one who leads the sheep by continuing to teach us how to live and learn and love in the world, step by step, as we try to fill some very large shoes, vainly attempting to follow in some very big footsteps, ginormous footprints that lead us and illumine our way. So here is the drill, the one thing we have in common with those who came before us and the one thing we hold in common with those who will follow, we live each gifted and glorious day, day by day, taking each day one day at a time. We are a people who always honor the past, but always live the present into the future. Yesterday's news! NO! Yesterday is gone! As George W. Bush once observed, "The past is over!" If we are not progressing, we are regressing! If we are not progressive, we are regressive! As someone painfully announced on ESPN in

commentary on the NFL draft, “Out with the old! In with the new!” In our context, that has nothing to do with age! It has everything to do with our mindset! Our margins for mission and ministry, money and members, are much too slim for us to not be creatively and boldly embracing plans for a bright and prosperous future, creatively visualizing all that is possible in our midst with the help of God, led by who and what we believe to be a still speaking Spirit! Living ancient paradigms is not only counter intuitive, but is counterproductive. If scripture is timeless, it must be allowed to speak a relevant word for today, informing and impacting any contemporary agenda that challenges and confronts us. **We must continually break free, liberate ourselves, from the shackles of tradition, good, bad, and ugly, warts and all! We must not settle for wallowing in the mire of “we have never done that before!” Yes, we honor a great legacy, a fabulous heritage, but must never allow ourselves to be beholden to it much less a slave to it!**

We strive to be faithful in our personal and in our corporate lives as we gather when we gather, building this local missional church together. So in the words of a United Church of Christ banner called “Be the Church” that hangs in the narthex. Every day, day by day, our lofty goal and aspiration as the people of God of the First Congregational United Church of Christ is to be a witness, even using words, yes, to “Protect the environment! Care for the poor! Forgive often! Reject racism! Fight for the powerless! Share earthly and spiritual resources! Embrace diversity! Love God! Enjoy this life!” And I would add, be hospitable, radically and “extravagantly welcoming”, another UCC watchword, in every way imaginable and possible. And if we can do these things, we will build a just and beloved faith community, the kind of church that Jesus just might attend if he did return. Of course, come to think about, I think he is already here and I see him in every one of you! That was then! This is now!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and was with the early Church then and is with us now! Amen and amen.