

Fourth Sunday of Easter; A Celebration of the Good Shepherd

ACTS 4:5-12

PSALM 23

I JOHN 3:16-24

JOHN 10:11-18

April 21, 2024

Love Is as Love Does!

The writer of the first epistle of John sets the bar very high, a gold, platinum, palladium, standard, defining fully what it means to love, how to know that we are loving, that loving is at the core of our being, that the DNA of love is deep in our souls, deeply embedded in our spirits. This Johannine letter writer uses Jesus as the quintessential, the ultimate, example, citing the apparent willingness of Jesus to go even to the extreme measure of accepting the cross as the only possible solution, despite his slightly wavering in the garden on that Passover Thursday as he prayed on that fateful night of betrayal and arrest. Yes, Jesus chose to lay down his life for every human being, the ultimate act of love, to die as a living example for all his siblings, brothers and sisters each and every one. Jesus was willing to die for his convictions, yes, even perhaps on our behest, on behalf of every person Jesus would no longer call servants, refusing that hierarchical, top down, image, but now lovingly choosing to intimately regard his followers as his closest, most personal, friends. If then this sacrificial model is the standard rule of measure, the expectation, as unreasonable as it not only seems but is, then where do we go from here? What then shall we do? Well, to take at least some of the pressure off of us, I dare suggest that this level of loving commitment, demanding that we die the death of a martyr for the cause, is anything but a given, not a requirement built into being a person of Christian faith, an expectation ordering our faithful pursuits, at least for most of us, except and unless there comes a time when the horrific fate of

putting our lives on the line is the only option left. Always must throw in that caveat! I do not believe that martyrdom is a universal burden, a virtue demanded of every follower like it seemed to be back in the day in the early Church. I do not embrace the idea that one size fits all, that this heaviest weight, a millstone indeed, be put upon us, forced upon the rank-and-file among us, that we must go and do likewise, that we are required to sacrificially give our lives, offering ourselves to the max degree, unless, once again, that fate perhaps might indeed become the case for a few or for many, the calling and commitment for some! If we continue reading, we discover that what is sought from God in our lives can indeed be done, fully accomplished in the precious moments defining our lives, actions that can be carried out by each one of us, yes, fulfilled in our present circumstances and situations, requirements that we truly can manifest and apply to our daily walk as we travel our faithful pathways, seeking to follow in the blessed footsteps of Jesus as we make our own footprints in this life and in our world. **As we celebrate this Sunday of the Good Shepherd, always the Fourth Sunday of Easter on the liturgical calendar, the cyclical rhythm arranged by the Gospels highlighting the life of Jesus, describing so many of the adventures fulfilling his mission and ministry, his preaching and teaching. Every event and every lesson characterizing the personality of the rabbi is framed by the mystical merging of Chronos and Kairos time as it orders our worship guided by this thing we call the Church Year. These lections provide the insight that remind us that throughout our lives we are called to be both sheep and shepherd and all at the same time. Images of sheep and shepherd abound throughout the biblical narrative, Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures alike, each pastoral metaphor reminders of the simple and complex relationships formed between us and God, between ourselves and our neighbor, and even in our relationship to self. All these intimate relationships are born of and immersed in love when they are at their best, their healthiest. The lections for today soberly remind us that love is love, that love is always loving, that love is as**

love does, love our only option, love the only solution to what ails our individual and societal woes, is love, to be loving.

Sheep! I have always wondered how the image of sheep as a passive metaphor for the people of God was developed to the degree that it became permanently, concretely, galvanized in the early Church, forever revealed in sacred texts. Let us ponder together this morning! Why the sheep? Sheep may be simple creatures, but this chosen animal as the primary guide directing us humans, as the perfect model directing our behavior, makes for a complex if not complicated conundrum indeed. Oh sure, we know that we are to be led like a flock as the sheep in the fold of God's pasture. But sheep are often led to slaughter, little lambs once sacrificially offered as an aromatic, a most pleasing and pleasant olfactory gift, their little bleating throats slit at the altar, allowing their blood to pour, to flow freely, splattering everywhere, this gross, messy, display all orchestrated to satisfy the supposedly insatiably hungry, bloodthirsty lust blamed on their God, all choreographed to make God happy, this ancient ritual a rite intended by design to please the ravenous appetite, of the Divine. And of course, as they were back in the day, little innocent lambs continue to be a rather tasty little animal! No doubt, Jesus ate lamb, assuming he was a carnivore! I certainly hope so! More protein, if you don't mind! Nothing like some medium rare lamb chops, a little rack of lamb please, to please the palate! In the biblical lore of the Gospels, the one is protected while temporarily leaving the others behind, exposing them to wolves and other ravenous creatures, risking the safety of the ninety-nine until that one is restored to the flock. Of course, once that one's number is called and that lamb rings the dinner bell, well! Sheep ranchers swear that sheep are among the brightest non-beast beasts. That is their story, and they are sticking to it! Great mythology! For what it is worth I find sheep to be rather dumb, their lemming-like herding tendencies revealing them to have no agency of their own as they dutifully follow the herd in lockstep. If

one jumps in the air, they all do likewise! Sheep play follow the leader perhaps better than any other domesticated animal.

Having helped with the annual sheep-shearing process on a local ranch during my days in Montana, Sweet Grass County known as the land of sheep herders, indeed the Herders being the official mascot for the local high school, I have had the pleasure and privilege to get up close and personal with sheep and their parts. Be nice now! All I will say is that there is a certain spot, male or female, that you grab and twist when you want a stubborn or slow afoot sheep to move in the desired direction as you shuttle them toward the pen. Once they have been enclosed, another twist to strongly urge them to rocket up the chute to the waiting sheerer for their thirty second buzz cut, harmless but stressful! Works like magic! I will never forget my first instructions as a rookie! Don't be bashful! Thank God for thick gloves and peer pressure from the knowledgeable veteran crew! And, of course, Jesus became known as the ultimate lamb, the sacrificial lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, according to the musings found in the Gospel of John, leading to an awful theological perversion developed by the early Church called Substitutionary Atonement, a horrific fundamentalist, but very biblical, doctrine of the cross, perversely defining the Passion, the sordid interpretation from which we cannot escape and with which we struggle mightily to justify every Lent and Holy Week. Folks, there is never any justification for child sacrifice! Period! Case closed! Sheep are fine if God desires that we human types have no agency, that we go through life like bobbleheads, parroting what often masquerades as wisdom to one another, benignly accepting status quo, the blind leading the blind, everyone shuffling over the cliff. I do not think that God created us in the divine image to robotically function like sheep. **The image of the sheep as our go to example is a metaphor gone astray, pun intended, way out of control! Taken too far but to what is a logical conclusion, being a sheep basically means having no agency, not capable of independent thinking, no intellectual curiosity, no**

critical reflection, no consideration of possible counter narratives, never suggesting a contrary or opposing viewpoint, that might have the potential to shake the foundations, changing the scope of diminishing human dynamics, to disturb status quo, that might startle or unsettle the prevailing content of our theory and praxis, specifically confronting the kinds of backward, flat earth subversively biased attitudes commensurate with rightwing Christian nationalism, etc. One cannot be a sheep and comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, helping to bend the arc of social justice for all. One cannot be a sheep and speak truth to power, to challenge authority, to stand in the gap between the haves and the have nots while demanding social justice, especially the systemic change needed amidst the intractable stubbornness of institutional and systemic oppression. We cannot fight the systemic issues that confront the human species and be a sheep! It can be argued, despite what the good book says, that one cannot be a Christian, or at least an activist one, and be an obediently polite sheep. And yet, somehow, we strive to be the sheep of and in God's flock as we are implored to be! Oh, the irony! Truly there is an obvious oxymoron lurking somewhere in all this "sheepery", in all this "sheepness"!

Shepherd! In his book *Priests to Each Other*, the late Baptist theologian Carlyle Marney, the mentor to my mentor, discusses the interrelatedness, the interpersonal relationships, that we are all called to enjoy as joyfully willing participants in beloved faith Christian communities. Indeed, we are to be priests to one another, offering the best of our pastoral selves, the very word "pastor" a reminder that we are the flock as sheep of God's fold, yes, the shepherd shepherding the sheep. Each of these deeply compelling pastoral images remind us of still waters appearing as an oasis beside lush, green, pastures, the hospitably inviting, intoxicatingly welcoming, setting for the 23rd Psalm, a reminder of David's occupation before he was promoted, anointed as king. All that is

missing is some shade and some shelter! We can imagine it! It strikes me that when we think of images of shepherd, we immediately think of God as our ultimate shepherd, with Jesus as our shepherd, shall we say, on the ground, and perhaps even our parish ministers, yes, congregational pastors, as under-shepherds, whatever these pastoral images portray. I would like to suggest, using Marney's musings, that we are all in our own way, according to our call, shepherds in our own right, yes, called to be shepherds to one another. As rank-and-file members of beloved faith communities, we are all in relationship, interconnected, yes, even appropriately, wonderfully, enmeshed in some ways, accountable to one another, each one responsible for each other as we make our spiritual pilgrimages, as we make our faith journeys alone and together. Being shepherd to each other offers us the reminder that we are not alone, or at least should not be, that we are interdependent, not dependent, definitely not co-dependent, that we continually rely on each other, trusting one another, to sustain the meaning, the motives, the momentum, and the movements informing and informed by the belief and beliefs that order our lives, that spiritually feed us, a devotion that fuels our faith, and guide our steps. When our belief and faith is lacking in any capacity whatsoever, it is the care and concern, the compassion, empathy and sympathy, the holy intervention, the love, of those around us who take up the slack and help us carry our load when we are weak, when we are sick and tired, and yes, when we grieve.

This morning I would like for you to think of this worship space, this splendid sanctuary, in fact, think of our church, as a template, a paradigm, reflecting the pastoral images portrayed in Psalm 23. Think of this pastoral setting, this beautiful tableau, unfortunately mostly conveniently invoked at funerals and memorials, as a window into who and what we should be and aspire to be as beloved faith community. Think of this sacred setting, this holy space, as a grassy meadow, a green pasture indeed. We rest in this place of communal

worship beside peaceful, still, waters, yes, sweet waters indeed. Shout out to Pat Tucker for that local image! All these graciously good, hospitably welcoming and inviting, gifts are solely initiated by the God who created them for our peace and pleasure! In this sacrosanct place we are reminded of the sacred pathways we have trod and the newly cleared paths that the Holy One sets before us as we seek together to discern the will of God for our congregation, calling us to go boldly forth beyond these walls to do ministry, to be the local missional church God desires for us to be. Even against the backdrop of all that is light and life, we also experience darkness, the darkest valleys, here, sharing our grief and pain, consoling one another, offering the best of our compassion, our care and comfort to those who have experienced whatever constitutes their dark night of the soul in their real time crises moments. The cross serves as our rod and staff, a tangible symbol reminding us that God suffers when we suffer, that God feels our pain, that God is with us and that we are not, we are never, alone. As we gaze front and center to this table that serves as an Altar, a place where sacrament is celebrated, we experience a lavish meal prepared for us, creatively visualized every time we meet even when the table is bare. It is a visible sign, a mystical metaphor speaking to an invisible grace! In this special place of quiet rest and retreat, this version of a public hermitage, we are reminded that in the Spirit our heads are bathed in the oil of mystery, of awe and wonder, yes, transcendence, and our cups are overrun with gracious goodness and faithful love, abiding in the sure goodness and mercy that only comes from God. Every liturgical symbol speaks volumes, every ritual a marker, every litany we recite reinforcing ancient words offering hope and promise, every reading telling the old, old, story, every prayer the supplications of our hearts and minds, every song we sing, every proclamation we preach, are all reminders that we are promised rooms with a view, another Johannine image, a view of the Holy, that God pursues us all the days of our lives, never allowing us to outrun or escape the all-encompassing love of God. Yes, every

sacramental offering is a reminder that we will live forever in the house of the Lord, yes, as long as we live, eternity being a very long breath, yes, time freezing as time immemorial. Yes, in this place, surely goodness and mercy follow us daily, stalking us in a most contagious, a most satisfying, a most loving and gracious way. Imagine this space in that way! Oh, what a pasture the shepherd prepares for us sheep when we enter this room of rooms.

In the Gospel of John today we are reminded of the difference between the Good Shepherd, the true shepherd, and a facsimile, a fake version. The proof of the pudding is the declaration that the Good Shepherd is always willing to sacrifice life and limb to protect the sheep, something that a hired hand simply will not do if push comes to shove. There is so much theology swirling around the death of Jesus, once again, so much of it bad but biblical, his execution by crucifixion, some of which is not so flattering toward the ultimate shepherd, the One, the God, he called Abba, Father, his heavenly parent. It is easy to dismiss the capital punishment inflicted on Jesus if it is simply a matter of God did it, that God ordained or predestined it, choreographed like a drama, yes, ironically a Passion Play, exposing the weakness, the jealousy and insecurity of a narcissistic God in need of appeasement, ungraciously exacting an ounce of flesh as retribution for our sin, to secure some sick level of revenge revealing a most petulant, immature, childishly malevolent deity. Jesus died because humanity, then and now, seems incapable of grasping love as the ultimate example of goodness and grace, a reminder that despite our evolutionary prowess we have not evolved all that much as a species, exposing ourselves as nothing more than another mammal among many mammals. Our survival instincts haunt and rule us, dominating our motives, questionable as many of them are, demanding that we circle the protective wagons that defend tribe and clan against all comers and at all costs, preemptively attacking any perceived enemy that we even remotely think might do us harm. **Let us be honest with ourselves and with one another, Jesus' level of**

love scares a lot of us because it demands so much from us. It requires loyalty to the untrustworthy, vulnerability beyond all reasonable doubt, a trust in others that exceeds our socially compromised immune systems, an exposure that is often transparently on display when we humans are at our worst, revealing the selfish motivations that spur our actions. Jesus died, rather was killed, because he displayed all the above, was completely transparent, willing to put his life on the line in every risky way, fully exposed in a way that meant that his integrity was realized with a crystal clarity that challenged, yes, threatened, the comfort zones of all who encountered and engaged him. Jesus was authentic to the core of his being, genuine in every measure, his integrity never called into question, always beyond reproach, despite the disagreement and conflict he brought into the fragile fabric of societal and religious systems. The calm demeanor of this rabbi, a truly non-anxious presence if ever there was one, was especially disturbing and threatening to the hardline sensibilities of the powers and principalities, any kind of abusive tendencies commensurate with any corrupted ruling authorities, yes, Jesus on occasion even daring to question the motives of those who had signed up for his calling, those who had chosen his way, following in his steps, just to make sure they had no regrets and were not looking back to the lifestyle that dictated their former lives. As followers of the way know all too well, his way continues to get in the way of those who have cheapened, even subverted, his message, those who only want to embrace the acceptable, the kinder and gentler, polite parts of his message, his mission and ministry, his profound teaching and preaching. As I have said about many who claim to be Christian these days, throwing rocks in glass houses with the accuracy of a boomerang, daring to look in the mirror, a lot of the people who claim to love Jesus do not seem to like him very much because his entire life served as an inconvenient truth calling forth inconvenient, yes, uncomfortable, awkward for some, challenges that take many folks far beyond the comfortable places, yes, the comfort

zones, the safe boxes of their insular and ignorant worlds. Jesus did not have to color outside the lines because there were no lines! Jesus died because compromise and complicity, accommodation, was not in his DNA nor in his vocabulary. His politics and his theology—Jesus was both political and theological, a double whammy—could not and would not be sacrificed on any altar of nice conversation, double-talk, or polite speak. He was fully loving and expected those who would take up his yoke, his mantle, to be likewise, fully loving, knowing that if we are not fully loving then we are not loving at all. Yes, it is a high standard, the highest! The bar is set way above our paygrade! And yet, every day we aspire to the calling to which we have been called, hoping, with a little grace thrown in for good measure, that we might somehow come close, get it right at least on occasion. And because of grace, close is always acceptable and blessed, a passing grade on the divine scale, yes, close enough indeed! Thanks be to God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and loves all the sheep as only the shepherd can! Amen and amen!

