

Easter 4, Yr. C,
May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23, John 10:22-30

Before I begin the sermon proper, I would like to point out something about John's Gospel. Many people feel that John's gospel is the most spiritual of the four. It is also, however, the gospel that has most often been used to support anti-Semitism. As you know this has been going on for centuries and has raised its ugly head once again, now in our time and in our country. So it's well to remind ourselves about the context of this Gospel. First of all, we need to remember that Jesus was a Jew.

Seemingly, there are still people who aren't aware of that. Second, John was a Jew and he was writing to Jews. So this is a quarrel within the family – Jews that were Christians and Jews that were not. And we need to remember that John was writing at a time when the Christian Jews were being expelled from the synagogues, so feelings were running high. And it's also good to remember that it was the Romans, not the Jews, that killed Jesus, in spite of that tag of Christ-killers that were often pinned on the Jews. We've been late coming to some of these

realizations, but we're blessed to have them before us now.

Now, the sermon proper.

We always hear about the Good Shepherd on the 4th Sunday after Easter, but it's rare that Good Shepherd Sunday and Mother's Day coincide.

When we think about shepherds in the Bible, and with the readings before us, we think about protection and presence and nurturing. But we think those same things about mothers – and not just mothers, but parents, godparents, teachers, really anyone who mentors and guides and nurtures the young. Here are a couple of good Mother's Day stories. The first is about a teenage boy who bounds into the house and finds his mother in bed. Truly concerned, he asked if she was OK and she responded that, indeed, she didn't feel well. He responded, "Well, don't worry a bit about dinner. I'll be happy to carry you down to the stove." Or these sayings about famous mothers: Alexander the Great's mother: How many times do I have to tell you – you can't have everything you want in this world! Or Achilles' mother: Stop imagining things;

there's nothing wrong with your heel. Or Franz Schubert's mother: Take my advice, son. Never start anything you can't finish. Humor aside, what we're talking about with mothers in the broadest sense is loving and caring and nurturing.

If we look at the scriptures this morning, we can carry that thread of caring and nurturing all the way through. In the Acts reading, Dorcas was a woman who clearly cared for the widows in the community. They are grieving as they remember her kindness and her creativity and her care for them. In the psalm, we hear about the Good Shepherd who walks with us through all of life, including those dark valleys – protecting, caring, loving. In the reading from Revelation, John is probably talking about all those who were faithful in spite of Roman persecution, but we can read it more broadly to celebrate all those saints of God who hold fast through all the tribulations and trials of a world that often turns its back on God. And then there's the reading from John. I have said before that it's usually instructive to read what comes before and after the verses we are looking at on a Sunday morning. In this case, just before our reading, the

Jews who are conversing with Jesus are trying to figure out how he fits into their understanding. Some thought he was possessed by an evil spirit and, therefore, crazy. Others were saying, no, that can't be because no evil spirit would have been part of healing the blind as Jesus had done. So, and I can appreciate this, they want to KNOW – are you the Messiah? Just tell us plainly. Jesus replies by saying that he has told them, but they don't believe and he's shown them by the things he has done, but that hasn't convinced them either. This text leaves us wondering what would have happened if Jesus HAD spoken clearly – but then he says, “THE FATHER AND I ARE ONE.” And the next sentence, which we don't have before us, tells us what happens with this plain speaking: they tried to stone him for blasphemy.

It's interesting to note that John the Baptist wasn't sure about Jesus either. You'll remember when Herod had imprisoned John, he sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the one they were waiting for, or if they should wait for another. And Jesus replied there also, “Go and tell John what you have seen: the blind see, the lame walk...” Jesus,

by healing, saves people from sickness and death and by what he was doing, by how he was living, he was showing and promising what the future, that future shown in Revelation, would look like – no more hunger or thirst, no more suffering or tears. But also, you will note, no more division – in that great multitude before the throne of God, there are people from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.

Looking at the Gospel, we could say that all those people belong to Christ. They have heard his voice. And not only heard it, but taken the words into their hearts and into their lives. In Greek, the word to “hear” is tied to the word “obey.” So, first we need to hear. Who hears? What does it mean to hear? How do we put ourselves in a place where we can hear? And then the question about whether we want to hear, given that we’ll be ask to obey, to change?

A number of us watched the movie *Tea with Mussolini* on Wednesday. One of the women was the widow of a former British ambassador to Italy and she was convinced, in spite of everything that was happening before her very eyes, that Mussolini

was a good guy and meant no harm. When it was pointed out to her that he was trying to build an empire starting with the invasion of Ethiopia, she responded airily, “Oh, all the best people have empires.” She could neither see nor hear what was actually happening. What kept her from hearing? Perhaps her confidence in her own position that she thought would keep her safe.

More importantly, what about us? We’re surrounded by voices – there’s a cacophony of voices, clamoring for our attention, giving us their own messages about how to live our lives. When I think about that, I’m always reminded of those Snoopy films in which all the kids hear when the adults are talking is wah, wah, wah. In the din of competing voices, do we hear the message of Christ? And if we do, what do we hear exactly? What IS that message? I’ve been in a couple of different situations lately when we’ve talked about the need to envision the Kingdom of God, because that was the essence of Jesus’ message. What do we think that means? What would that look like? In the Old Testament, it would have framed around the concepts of justice, righteousness and compassion, constructing a

community in which everyone had a voice, everyone was respected, everyone had enough. In the New Testament, that vision would have been retained and enriched by watching Jesus in action: this is what love looks like – healing, compassion, inclusion, joy.

I recently had an e-mail from a friend in Dallas who sent me a theologically heavy article that delved into various obscure doctrines. There's a place for that, of course. But I do wonder if, in essence, all these ideas are really quite simple.

And here, I'd like to tie this back to mothers. Jim Wallis, an evangelical Christian, who lives and works among the poor, says this about his upbringing:

“It was my mother's admonitions that became the first building blocks for my merging social conscience. Phyllis Wallis told her children to always do two things. First, if there is a child that nobody else will play with, you play with him or her, she ordered. It was like a rule of play for us – nobody gets left out. Second, if there is a bully who is picking on other people, you stand up for them, she courageously commanded...She also seemed

to tie these moral injunctions to our faith: It was what Jesus would have us do.” (*God’s Politics*)

And there’s one more. This one appeared in the last edition of *The Pulse* and was from David Eliot, the publisher. Under a picture of his grandmother, his mother and his young niece, he wrote a sort of poem:

My mom believes in peace. She believes it is possible. She always reminds me of that. She believes that we all should be treated equally. She believes that we can be better. She convinced me of that.

Sunday is Mother’s Day.

My grandmother – my mom’s mom – believed in peace. She believed that it was possible. She reminded my mom of that. She believed that we all should be treated equally. She believed that we could be better. She convinced my mom of all that.

Sunday is Mother’s Day.

Our mothers’ faith in you and me – let’s celebrate that.

I believe in peace. I believe that it is possible. I believe that we should all be treated equally. I believe that we can be better.

Happy Mother's Day.

There's the message: we're called to peace, compassion, generosity, inclusion - to hear it and then live it. Amen.