

1 John 3:16-24

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 25, 2012

Today - the fourth Sunday in Easter - is known as Shepherd Sunday because of all the sheep and shepherd imagery. These images are an attempt to answer the fundamental question of the Gospel: who is Jesus, and why is he important enough to get us all out of bed on a Sunday morning?

First of all, he's Jesus *Christ*. *Christ* is not a last name, but a title: Jesus is the *Christos*, the anointed one, the one chosen by God to save his people. When we speak of the Christ, we speak of God's embodied action in the world. When we speak of *Jesus Christ*, we say that the will of God to save his people was somehow made known particularly in a first-century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth.

Every Christian, and every Christian community, develops their own understanding of how exactly Jesus is the Christ. One such community combined Greek and Jewish understandings to describe the Christ as the Word of God, which was active not only in the First Century in Jesus of Nazareth, but also at the very dawn of time. We know their testament as the Gospel According to John, and one of the ways they spoke of Jesus was as the Good Shepherd.

After this Gospel was written, they continued to pray, to debate, to experience and reflect upon their salvation in Jesus Christ. They continued to ask themselves, who is Jesus, and how is he the Christ? Who does that mean we are? Who do he, and we, have to be so that this salvation we celebrate is both possible and meaningful, rather than just words on a page?

Some of these folks decided that the Christ, the divine creative power of God, was so present in Jesus that it pushed out his humanity: his humanity was not only irrelevant, but problematic. They believed that Jesus of Nazareth only *seemed* to be human, only *seemed* to have a body, and only *seemed to* die. Or possibly that the divine part of Jesus took up his body like a shell and abandoned him before death. We call this idea *Docetism*, from the Greek word *dokeo*, "I seem."

But if the power and presence of God cannot be known in and as a human being and a human body, what does that say about human beings and human bodies? What does that say about laughing and crying and eating and dying? What does it say about peeing and pooping and feeling the sun on your face and grass under your feet? Doesn't it say that they are all less Godlike, unimportant, even shameful? What does it say about the love of God for us, and about our human love-worthiness?

And so most of the community of John's Gospel decided that this was a heresy: an inadequate statement of Christian faith. We don't know what harsh words were said,

what fists were raised, what friendships were broken, but these Docetists said, "we can't worship with you any more. We can't break bread together any more. We can't live with you any more. You aren't the Christians we thought you were. We are Christ's sheep, and you are not."

Ouch.

How would it feel, to hear that?

I wonder if it feels like a divorce.

Fortunately I don't speak from personal experience, but in 1967 two psychiatrists compiled a list of 43 life events and assigned each of them a stressfulness score. Divorce was #2, ranking only below the death of a spouse. Divorce can really shake you up.

Divorce is a serious business because marriage is a serious business. At a certain point in a wedding ceremony, we announce that you are now married. Something important about you has changed. You may even reflect this change by changing your name, the primary thing that identifies you to others. Part of your job, part of your purpose, part of your identity is now to care and be cared for, to and by this other person. It may also follow or lead to having children.

And then to suddenly be told, or gradually come to realize, that this is no longer the case - what does that do to you? You're not a lover, you're not a spouse, you're not a partner, you're not part of a parenting team. If your divorce is especially nasty, maybe

your partner tells you you're not even capable of these things. Or maybe you just tell yourself that. You may wonder if you're worthy or capable of love.

Those remaining in John's community seem to feel the same way. They stood up for the principles they thought were right and important, but the angry denunciations that their former siblings in faith flung at them as they left, made them unsure of themselves. Previously they knew themselves as the children of God, the followers of Christ, the sheep of the Good Shepherd. But now they begin to doubt themselves. "Our hearts condemn us," they say. Where can they turn to for certainty? How can they regain their confidence? What can they measure themselves against?

And so someone, who we also call John because he wrote to the community of John's Gospel, took up their pen and reminded them that the most certain thing in the world is the love of God.

God the Creator loves us. God's fundamental activity is love in action: a boundless energy that creates and sustains from the dawn of time to the First Century to 2021. This is a love for Creation and for humanity in all its solidity, all its bodiness, all our smelliness and happiness and silliness and messiness. God is embodied in our humanity because God loves us.

Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, love embodied, is defined by his willingness to lay down his life for his sheep. We remember this happened on Good Friday. And the

sure and measurable guide of whether we are his sheep is whether we follow his commandment to likewise lay down our lives for each other, for our fellow sheep. We remember this commandment on Maundy Thursday.

If we are willing to lay down our lives, how much more are we willing to lay down our time and our possessions for other sheep who are in need, rather than separating ourselves from them by refusing to let their need touch our hearts?

If we can't trust our hearts, we can trust Jesus Christ, and we can reassure our hearts by looking to our actions and whether they are in alignment with his commandments. Do we serve God's children? Do we wash each other's feet? Do we feed Christ's sheep?

If so, then we know that God is at work in us. We can act with increasing boldness, asking God for what we need as we align our hearts and our steps more and more in his direction.

Siblings in Christ, you are the children of God. You belong to the Good Shepherd. I know it; I have have seen it. And if you have forgotten that, if you can't feel it right now, then act it out. Reassure yourself, by walking in the steps of the Good Shepherd. Lay down your time, lay down your talents, lay down your love in service of others; lift up your hearts to the Lord, and they will remember.

You are blessed. You are a blessing.

Amen.

Sources:

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