

Year B 4th Sunday in Easter John 10:11-18 The Good Shepherd and the Cross

The first church that we have evidence of is a house church – all churches in early Christianity were people’s homes – and the earliest one we know of is from the early 200’s. It’s called Dura-Europas. In it is one of the first images we have of Jesus. It is a drawing, on the stone wall of the house, of Jesus carrying a really big sheep across the back of his shoulders. Jesus the Good Shepherd. That was the image – the symbol – of Jesus that early Christians drew on their walls and carried in their hearts.

Although we are very familiar with the idea of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, it is not the primary image that we have on our walls, behind our altars, or around our necks. Christians today have as their most iconic symbol the cross. It is our symbol of hope, of victory, of life with God. As strange as it may seem to us, the cross did not come into common use by Christians until hundreds of years after Jesus’ death on the cross. Early Christians pictured Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

Why did they do that? Is there something they knew that we have forgotten? Have we pushed aside something important? Well, perhaps you noticed, in this gospel, that there are two important pieces of information that Jesus repeats over and over. The first is that the shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know their shepherd. There is a bond between them. The sheep know his voice and they trust him – they follow him. The shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know their shepherd.

The second thing we hear again and again is that the shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The shepherd not only guides and cares for his sheep, the shepherd will die to protect his sheep. The shepherd will die **willingly** for his sheep. Jesus is explaining to his disciples his role as the Good Shepherd in the middle of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was an urban centre so there were no sheep in Jerusalem except for the ones being brought to the temple to be sacrificed. Those little guys had zero choice in where they were going and what was about to happen to them. Jesus sets himself up in contrast to those sheep. He is making it really clear to his disciples that this is his choice. He has the power to lay down his life and to

pick it back up again. He knows what's in store for him and he is allowing the scene to play out.

The shepherd knows his sheep, the sheep know their shepherd, and the shepherd lays down his life willingly for his sheep. Because of those two important pieces of information that get repeated we see that, not only are the two symbols connected – the Good Shepherd and the cross are connected – we see, too, that the image of the Good Shepherd explains the cross, it helps us to make sense of the cross.

Why did Jesus die on the cross? The shepherd and the sheep have a very strong bond with each other. They know each other. The shepherd loves his sheep more than his own life. The sheep trust the shepherd with their lives. They are in a deep and abiding relationship. Jesus died on the cross to bring us into that deep and abiding relationship. He died because he is the Good Shepherd. He died on the cross to be our Good Shepherd – present tense...now.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. That is a favourite psalm of many Christians – perhaps of many of you. In fact, for Christians who do not regularly attend worship services or read Scripture, that is the only psalm they are familiar with. The Lord is my shepherd. It brings comfort and hope. It speaks of a shepherd who is present to us now, a shepherd who is with us. It is the cross that allows that to be a reality.

The corrupted and corruptible powers of this world nailed Jesus to the cross. They showed him their worst and Jesus gave them his best – his perfection...perfect love, perfect obedience, perfect trust. Jesus won for us the victory over systemic evil and over death because he died in perfection and was raised to new life, never to die again. We share in that victory over sin and death through the mystery of baptism. One part of the meaning of baptism for us is that we are clothed in Christ – made a new creation – because we now have the presence of the Holy Spirit resting on us while at the same time resting on Christ...joining us together, bringing us into the presence of Christ and making Christ present to us.

Christ the Good Shepherd is present to us – we are the sheep of his flock. This helps us to realize that our salvation is to be in relationship with him. Let me say that again...Our salvation is to be in relationship with him. Salvation is following where he leads and doing what he does. The readings drive home this point. Peter declares, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” “And this is his commandment,” John writes in his letter, “that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.” Following where he leads and doing what he does.

He laid down his life for us, John reminds us. We must lay down our lives for others, he says. Now, John doesn’t literally mean that all of us should be dying for others. John is trying to make it clear just how radical our self-giving needs to be. Giving of ourselves in love to others is to lay down our lives, lay them open, bare our souls – not loving in word and speech, John says, but in truth and action. Following where he leads and doing what he does.

Jesus, our Shepherd, laid down his life to bring us into relationship with God, to welcome us into God’s kingdom. But that is not the end of the story. It’s not the end because it’s not all about us. We are a part of God’s plan – an important part – but God’s plan is bigger than you and it’s bigger than me. God will not rest until the world is reconciled to him, welcomed into his kingdom. One flock, one shepherd, Jesus says. The Good Shepherd laid down his life to bring us into relationship and now we, his little flock, are called to do the same. Following where he leads and doing what he does. Through the power of the Holy Spirit making Christ present to us, welcoming us into God’s kingdom, we now bear that presence and that invitation to all others. Laying down our lives – loving in truth and action – to bring the world into relationship with God, welcoming them into God’s kingdom.

We all have been given gifts of love by the Spirit that enable us do this. One young Christian man, an MRI tech, shared his experience with his congregation. This young man puts patients at the local hospital through a series of diagnostic procedures. He said: “Do you know what’s going on with patients when they

come to see me? They are freaked out. They're scared." He went on: "My calling is to make certain this technology functions accurately, for it will read out a life or death sentence for them. So I receive each person as a gracious host. I tend them gently so they will feel respected and cared for in this huge medical system." His story continued: "This last week Thelma came for a test. She was fragile. She asked for only two things – that I do the test accurately and that I pray for her. I did both. Together we finished her procedures and I sent her on her way. Four minutes later a 'Code Blue' signal called me to join the emergency medical team to respond to a death. I discovered that Thelma had died waiting for another procedure in an adjacent room. I realized I was the last one to tend her life." He finished by repeating: "This is my calling."

"We know love by this," John writes, "that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Following where he leads...doing what he does.