



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

306 N. Division Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 • (734) 663-0518 • www.standrewsaa.org

Sermon for Sunday, April 22, 2018

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

ROBERT WESTVEER

Acts 4:5-12 | Psalm 23 | 1 John 3:16-24 | John 10:11-18

The readings today use the image of shepherds and their sheep. We know all the cracks and jokes directed against sheep. They are feckless, fickle, feeble and totally dependent on others to care for them. But despite all of these faults, sheep do have one saving grace. The Gospel reading for today tells us: “The doorkeeper admits [the shepherd] and the sheep hear his voice; he calls his own by name and leads them out. “ To emphasize this point, the Gospel reading repeats it: “I know my own and my own know me.” How this relationship develops between sheep and their shepherd is not clear but appears to be rooted in love. Perhaps the relationship develops like that when a baby recognizes the voice of her parents. Perhaps the relationship is like that of a young child who strays from her mother in a store. She becomes frightened when she can no longer see her mother. She is reassured when she again hears the voice of her mother calling her by name and she runs back into the arms of her mother.

This, says the writer of the First Epistle of John, is how we, as the body of God, learn to recognize and follow the voice of the shepherd of our faith. “And this is the commandment: that we should believe in the name of Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.” The commandment has two prongs: one directed in love up to Jesus and one directed outward to others. We cannot have one without the other. We must have the first before we can do the second. When we keep the command of love, we know that we dwell in Jesus and he dwells in us.

Love is an action word. This is what John tells us: let us love not in word or speech but in truth and action. This is what James tells us: If your faith does not issues forth in works of love, it is dead. This is what Paul tells: If I speak with human tongues or those of angels but do not do so in love, nothing will come out but noise. This is what Jesus tells us: The first commandment is this—love God above all else; a second commandment equal to it is this—love your neighbor as yourself. When we keep the command of love, we know that we dwell in Jesus and he dwells in us.

If love is an action word, how are we to exhibit this love by our actions? Both our Gospel reading and our Epistle reading tell us Jesus' love for us was shown when he laid down his

life for us. No less than four times in eight verses, Jesus tells us being a good shepherd led him to lay down his life for his sheep. And the very first thing our Epistle reading tells us is the same thing: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.” (1 John 3:16). But then the Epistle writer does something unexpected by telling us we ought to lay down our life for one another. What Jesus did for us, we are now called to do for others.

When we, as the congregation of God gathered at St. Andrews, decided to begin the Breakfast Program and to continue it without fail all these many years, did we not lay down or life for those in need? The writer of the epistle reminds us of this when he says: “But as for the well-to-do who see their brother or sister in want but shut their eyes—and their hearts—how could anyone believe that the love of God dwells in them?” (1 John 3:17, Phillips translation).

I know of people at St. Andrews who have taken the responsibility of bringing someone who is homebound, has mobility problems or lack transportation to St. Andrews on a regular basis. They do this willingly and over an extended period of time. Despite the times when that person is not ready, has forgotten what day it is or decides at the last minute not to come after all, they are reluctant to drop the ministry. Are they not laying down their life for another? I have a friend who spent two years caring for his wife at home while she was dying of cancer. He did everything for her: meals, medication, laundry and companionship twenty four hours a day. Did he not lay down his life for his wife? I know of others who cared for their mother after she suffered a stroke and then developed memory problems for many years. They filled out countless Medicare forms, ordered the appropriate medications, altered her clothes, changed her shoes from lace up shoes to slip on shoes, and visited her weekly in good times and bad until she died. Did they not lay down their life for their mother? When we keep the command of love, we know that we dwell in Jesus and he dwells in us.

At this point, you may be thinking Lent would have been a more appropriate time to talk about laying down one's life for another. Why are we hearing this call now on the fourth Sunday of Easter? Whenever we lay down our life for another we follow the example of Jesus. In our Gospel reading, Jesus

tells us he laid down his life for our sake in order to take it up again for our sake. Whenever we lay down our life for another, we proclaim the Lord's resurrection until he comes again. We can lay down our life for another because a resurrection life enables to take it back up again. Our actions loudly and boldly proclaim that resurrection was not a one-time occurrence in the past but a living and life-changing reality now.

Love is an action word. Psalm 23, our psalm for the day, shows us how active is God's love for us. The language of the psalm is full of action. God, as our shepherd, leads us and guides us. Sometimes God leads us in pleasant places—beside still waters and in green pastures. Sometimes God guides us through less pleasant places like the valley of the shadow of death. Yet, even there, God prepares a table for us despite the presence of our enemies. It is just here that the familiar language of the King James Version of the psalm is inadequate. God's love does not merely "follow" us; God's love passionately pursues us with love and mercy so strong it will never ever let us go. Again, the Hebrew word is not "dwell"—as if our journey comes to an end—the concept more accurately is: "We shall continually return to the house of the Lord." Read this way, we keep the sense of travel where God both leads us out to pasture and then leads us back to the sheepfold.

The reading from the First Epistle of John tells us when we keep the command of love, we know that we dwell in Jesus and he dwells in us. This is also what Psalm 23 tell us. God will guide us in the paths of righteousness for no other reason than God's own self-giving love for us. The light on our path comes down to us from God's self-giving love and shows us how to lay down our life for others. We are not so much engaged in a journey to God but in a journey with God. By living a resurrection life, we affirm not so much that we will one day be with God in heaven but that God will one day dwell with us here in the new creation where all things will have been redeemed, restored and renewed.

Let us, therefore, commit ourselves, by God's resurrection grace, to the task of bringing the Kingdom of God about on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.