

The Fourth Sunday of Eastertide
John 10:11-18; Psalm 23; Acts 4:5-12; I John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18 cannot be understood to any depth without appreciating its context, for it does not stand alone. This portion of scripture really has its origins in the story of the healing of the man born blind in 9:1-34 (in fact, 10:19-21 makes an explicit connection between Jesus' "good shepherd" discourse and the healing of that blind man). That healing brought about a major confrontation between that man and the Judean religious/political establishment who believed their control of the populace threatened by the direct confrontation of this formerly blind beggar when they sought to minimize what Jesus had done in healing him. His statement to them, when they sought to discredit his testimony, was uncompromising: "Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing" (9:30-33)! Their response was the fury of holding an indefensible position and knowing it – "You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to lecture us" (9:34)?

Jesus, when he confirms the man in his faith commitment to the kingdom of God, joins him in confronting the religious leaders by saying, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see (i.e., the blind man) may see, and those who do see (i.e., Israel's religious/political leadership who are well-versed in the Mosaic Law and its Jubilee demands) may become blind" (9:39). When they protest, Jesus then states, "If you were blind, you would not have sinned. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains" (that is, by saying you understand and affirm the Mosaic Law yet you disobey all its instructions to share power with the poor and equitably distribute wealth, then your sin is even the more obvious and damning).

It is in the context of this confrontation of the Jerusalem religious/political establishment (the "Judeans" [John 7:13; 19:38], as John calls them) that Jesus then shifts his attention to those Pharisees and priests who have taken to heart what he has said and have begun to be responsive to his message and person rather than being defensive. Yet they have not publicly embraced him "for fear of the Judeans". It is to these "almost believers" that Jesus directs the "Good Shepherd" message of John 10:1-21.

In essence, John 10:1-21 is an effort by Jesus to get the believing Pharisees and priests to stop "limping between two different opinions" (I Kings 18:21) and instead to unconditionally give themselves to Jesus and his kingdom, and thus become his disciples. The argument Jesus uses to call them to make a clear-cut decision for Christ, and thus join him in his liberating ministry to the people, is a metaphor about shepherds and sheep. That metaphor, as developed by Jesus, is directly built upon Ezekiel 34, and that prophet's explicit likening of the "shepherds" to the political and religious leaders of Israel.

Jesus notes that there are two types of shepherds that care for the flock of God (Israel, God's people). There is "the good shepherd" (i.e., Jesus, and those who openly follow him) who "lays down his life for the sheep" (10:11). And there are bad shepherds (i.e., the Judeans or priestly and pharisaical political, economic and religious systems of Israel), who come in "only to steal and kill and destroy" (10:10). The question ultimately is, "Which kind of shepherd are you? Are

you one who casts his lot with Jesus and his countercultural community and thus works for an equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation and for equal justice for all? Or are you one who wants to remain associated with and benefiting from the systems through the oppression and exploitation of the poor (which was exactly Ezekiel's point)?

You can't enter Jesus' new community of justice, equity and trusting relationship with God and each other by refusing to come through its "gate", Jesus argues (vss. 7-10). You can't embrace Jesus and his teaching except by making a public and uncompromising commitment, lived out in your actions and in dedication to the "beloved community". You can't sneak in another way, seeking to make yourself invisible and unnoticed by "the powers that be". That reveals you to be, along with them, a "thief and bandit", a "stranger" to the Christ's community. You will not be listened to, trusted or even taken seriously (vss. 1-5).

However, the text tells us that these Pharisees who so much wanted to believe and embrace Jesus' teachings, but on their own terms "did not understand what he was saying to them". His metaphor was too subtle to them, for there are none so blind as those who do not wish to see.

Thus, Jesus becomes much more direct. In four statements that are very close together, Jesus gives four "I AM" messages. Twice he says, "I am the gate (for the sheep)" (10:7, 10:9). And twice he declares, "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 10:14). Jesus declares that he – and not the Law of Moses nor the Temple worship nor even the interpretation by the Pharisees of the Law -- is the entrance into wholeness of life. Only Jesus is the entrance; there is no other. So the only question is whether you Pharisees and priests recognize that entrance and accept it!

Secondly, Jesus declares, "I am the good shepherd". He is not simply entrance into the shalom community. He is the one who makes sacrifice to enable the community to be formed. It is not the sacrifices made in the Temple that absolves from sin; it is the sacrificial act that Jesus makes through the surrender of his life that provides both absolution of sin and entrance into the Christian community. "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (10:11).

Because of such a sacrifice, people will know that Jesus is the authentic shepherd. He will not be taken for an employee who has no real investment in the care of the sheep, and who will abandon them if the confrontation becomes too intense or the stakes become too high.

Jesus therefore uses both two positive images and three negative ones. The positive images are "gate" and "good shepherd". The negative images are "thief", "stranger" and "hired hand" (or "employee"). The challenge Jesus thus makes to the almost-believing Pharisees is "Will you join Jesus as he seeks to be "gate" (entrance) and "good shepherd" (redemptive sacrifice) to the world and the people of God? Or will you prove yourselves "thief", "stranger" and "hired hand" to the people by refusing to make public commitment to Jesus and the kingdom of God"

Jesus' call to commitment sets the almost-believing Pharisees into consternation (10:19-21). And they are joined by some "Judeans" (the Jerusalem ecclesiastical hierarchy). Some are saying, "He has a demon and is out of his mind". But other leaders are saying, "These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind" (10:21, referring back to the miracle of 9:1-34)? So, they remain divided both between each other and within

themselves, unwilling to make the commitment that will cause them their ecclesiastical status, still “limping between two opinions”. They do not realize that to not make a decision, to not come down clearly and publicly on the side of Jesus, to not stand for justice and economic equality *is* to make a decision. It is to make a decision against Jesus and all that Jesus stands for, and thus to “lose their own soul”.

Psalm 23 continues the shepherd and sheep motif. The problem with this psalm, however, is that it is so well known that we recite it for its beauty and the comfort that it provides, rather than taking seriously its implications. So let’s look at those implications, particularly in the light of the Gospel Lesson for today.

First, the psalmist begins, “Yahweh is my shepherd.” The task of the shepherd is to both guide the sheep and to protect the sheep. It is to give direction and to provide a comprehensive vision for the sheep because otherwise, sheep will simply graze from one patch of grass to another without giving any thought to where they are going or what they might be getting themselves into. Likewise, the role of the shepherd is to protect the sheep, because they have no real defense against any who might be their “enemy” – whether human, other animals, or nature itself. Therefore, for the psalmist to declare, “Yahweh is my shepherd” is to suggest that it is in being in relationship with God that gives us both direction and protection in our lives.

What is significant about this passage, however, is that the metaphor, “shepherd” is used for God. In John 10:11 and 14, Jesus uses the metaphor for himself (“I am the Good Shepherd”). And so that there is no question about what Jesus is actually doing in using that metaphor for himself, he uses a linguistic term that was thoroughly unacceptable and would never be used by Jews in his day. He says “I AM the Good Shepherd”!

When Moses asked God his name, God responded “I AM WHO I AM; so tell them that I AM sent me to you” (Exodus 3:14). God’s reply is virtually impossible to translate into English, because what God did was to name himself by using an early form of the Hebrew verb “to be”, rather than a proper noun (which is what you would expect God to have used). In Hebrew, the word that would be spoken would be “Yahweh”, but that is not a name; it is a verb. The only way we can communicate into English the uniqueness of the words is to capitalize all of its letters (“I AM WHO I AM” or “I AM”). .

One would say, “Yahweh”. But by Jesus’ time, that name had become so precious that it was never spoken by a Jew, not even by the high priest. If Jews wanted to speak of God, therefore, they would combine the verbs of the name “Adonai” (“Lord”) with the consonants of “Yahweh” to get “Jehovah” (which was, consequently, a manufactured name). Because the name was sacred, no Jew would use the words “I am”; rather, they would find some other way of communicating the same thought (e.g., “He who is presently standing before you is the Good Shepherd”). Therefore, for Jesus to say, “I AM the Good Shepherd”, he would be communicating to any good Jew that he was Yahweh; he was God! What such a statement would accomplish for a Jew would be, first, utter shock, and second, immediate identification with the Psalmist’s statement in Psalm 23, “Yahweh is my shepherd!” Therefore, all that Psalm 23 would suggest of God’s being and activity toward us would automatically be transferred over

to Jesus. No wonder the political, economic and religious hierarchies of Jesus' day were offended at Jesus' words!

What is it, then, that God (Jesus) would do for Israel, for God's "sheep"? The Psalm makes two particularly powerful statements. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (vs. 5a). "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me" (vs. 4a).

What is significant about these statements is not only what is said, but what is not said! The psalmist does not promise that God will deliver us from "the darkest valley" nor will we be delivered from "the presence of my enemies". Life will continue to have significantly dark times. And we will continue to face opposition, resistance and even hatred.

What the psalmist does promise us, however, is God's presence (Jesus' presence) in the midst of our darkest time. We will be emboldened, equipped and given perseverance to face into those dark times of oppression, domination and exploitation.

An even-more powerful metaphor is used by the psalmist in the statement, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies". But who are "my enemies"? The immediate assumption is that it is people whom the one reciting the psalm doesn't like and who don't like him or her. But it is far more than that. I would suggest that "my enemies" is the Psalmist's reference to the systems! It is Israel's political, economic and religious powerful and the structures and organizations that lay behind these powerful ones – structures and regulations used by them to keep the people under control and to take full economic and political advantage of them. It is exactly those forces in society that John refers to as "the Judeans"! And when the informed Jew reads of "my enemies" in this passage, he or she will not be able to do other than remember Ezekiel's reference to them as "evil shepherds" (Ezek. 34:1-10).

When we hear the term, "shepherds", we immediately think of the clergy "shepherding their flock" or congregation. But that was not the primary use of the word "shepherd", either in Israel or in the ancient world. The term "shepherd" was used exclusively for the political leaders of a nation (e.g., Num. 27:16-17; I Kings 22:17). So Ezekiel was making quite a statement when he wrote of the powerful leaders of Israel and of the systems through which they functioned, "Ah, you shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? But you eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them" (34:2-4).

The Psalmist is making a profound statement by using the metaphor of God setting a table for God's people so that we can dine with God "in the presence of my enemies". He is, first, making a political statement – that those powerful in our society who the people depend upon to most have the people's interests at heart and to better their condition, are actually those who will most take advantage of the people and use them for the economic and political enhancement of the leaders themselves. The political, economic and religious leaders are the true enemies of the people. And they, like other wolves, are in our very midst! They have infiltrated our very

society, for they are at the core of our political, economic and religious systems. And they put themselves forward as our shepherds, but in reality are ravenous wolves (Ezek. 22:23-27), for they see us only as victims with whom they can take advantage!

But, second, “you prepare a table before me in the presence of (such) enemies”. The Psalmist is saying that God sets a table for his people so that they can dine with God “in the presence of these enemies”. The political, economic and religious systems will still be there, seeking to take advantage of us, trying to intimidate us with their supposed power, continuously “in our face”! But they will not conquer us who can analyze, understand and know how to thwart their abuse of power. They will not be part of the banquet. They will not be invited to share God’s bounty. They will be excluded because they choose to exclude themselves by abusing their position and by seeking to take advantage of the poor. The banquet of life will not be out of their sight. It will be in the midst of the people’s engagement in public life. That is where the obedient follower of Yahweh will be, contending for justice, equity and a Godly relational culture. And that is where God (Jesus) will be, sustaining and shepherding us to be the world-changers we are called to be!

The conclusion we must draw is this: Psalm 23 is not the fuzzy, warm, gentle psalm we emasculate it to be. It is, in reality, an extremely strong political statement, holding the systems accountable for their abuse of power, and calling God’s people to join God in being about the Godly task of shepherding the world (and its systems) into the world as God intended it to be.

Acts 4:5-12 is part of a larger story (4:1-22) that deals with the astute and sophisticated use of power by the apostles. It is one of the earliest recorded reactions of Israel’s systems and leadership to the rapidly expanding ministry of the earliest Christians. And it is all about the use or abuse of power.

Peter and John are both teaching and healing in the Temple. They have just healed a well-known Temple beggar (3:1-10) who had been lame from birth and who was now in his forties (4:22). Peter and John were using this occasion of this man’s healing to proclaim Christ to the Jewish people (3:11-26). When they did so, they were arrested by “the priests, the captain of the Temple and the Sadducees” (4:1) and were brought to trial the next day before representatives of the Sanhedrin – the ruling body of Israel (4:5-6). The judges were among Israel’s most important religious and political leaders (4:6). The issue that had brought Peter and John to trial is: “By what power or by what name did you do this healing” (4:7)?

It is important to note who was trying Peter and John, in order to be able to assess the importance of this trial. It was not the Sanhedrin itself. It was a “task force” of the Sanhedrin consisting of Annas, Caiaphas, John and Alexander, as well as those “who were of the high-priestly family” (4:5). Annas had been the high priest from 6 to 15 CE and was generally perceived as the true power behind the throne. Caiaphas was the current high priest at this telling, reigning from 18 to 36 CE. John was to become the high priest in 36-37 CE. And nothing is known of Alexander, except to say that by his inclusion in such an august list, he must have been someone very powerful, either in the Hebrew world or in Rome (his name is Greek). In other words, the top

power elite of Israel, recognizing the danger in this unexpected revival of the Galilean's movement, were trying these disciples.

The "crime" of which Peter and John were accused was that of heresy and acting in a revolutionary manner in both healing and preaching in the "name" of Jesus of Nazareth, attributing both healing and salvation to him (4:7). Peter himself put the issue most clearly: "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. For there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (4:8b-10, 12)!

Peter was not being coy about the "crime" of which he and John are accused. Instead, he stated it as clearly and as boldly as possible. How astutely Peter defended himself, however, is not obvious in the English translation because it can't capture the subtlety of the original Greek.

First, he spoke of the lame Temple beggar being "healed" by Jesus (the apostle was just a conduit for that healing, but it was Jesus' "name" that actually healed him), and then switched to talking about being "saved" by the "name" of "Jesus Christ of Nazareth". What was Peter arguing here?

Peter was building his defense on a very careful play on words in both verses 9 and 12. The Greek word "*sozo*" (used throughout vs. 9-12) can be equally translated "healed" and "saved". It was "the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" that brought about this man's healing, Peter declared – not the apostle's actions. But that healing was a sign that God's salvation was now accessible to all people through the "name" of Jesus (cf. Luke 1:69, 71, 77, 2:30; 3:6; 19:9; Acts 7:25; 13:26, 47; 16:11; 27:43; 28:28 for the same sort of play on words). "Healing" and "saving" go hand-in-glove, for one makes the body whole and the other makes the soul whole.

Second, Peter consistently spoke about the "name" of Jesus being the source of both healing and salvation. What did he mean by "name"?

In Hebrew culture, one's "name" was not simply the arbitrary designation given to a person by one's parents that identified him or her. Rather, the selection of a name was a carefully considered and deliberative act on the part of one's parents because that selection would both influence and was "predictive" of the kind of person that child would become. Thus, Peter meant "rock", and Jesus' changing of that apostle's name from Simon to Peter suggested that he would become a "rock" to the church. The name "David" means "beloved of God", and David was "a man after God's own heart" I Sam. 13:14). And the name "Judas" meant "betrayal".

What did the name, "Jesus" mean? It meant "Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh heals" (*sozo*). Thus, what Peter was declaring was that by the very "name" of Jesus, the risen Jesus was acting to heal and to save not just a blind beggar, but whoever would come to him in repentance and in cognizance of his sin (even high priests!). As one biblical scholar put it, "Just as the name of

Jesus had been the only hope for physical healing of the man crippled from birth, so also the name of Jesus is the only hope for the spiritual healing of mankind.”¹

Peter placed this issue very clearly in this most confrontational statement (when one keeps in mind that he is speaking to the political and economic elite of Israel before whom he is on trial). “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (4:12). Peter, in essence, was saying that the Law of Moses can’t save, Temple worship can’t save, strictly obeying Jewish rituals can’t save, even obeying high priests can’t save. Only Jesus can save (and heal). Peter has cut the issue most boldly, because now Israel’s elite suddenly find themselves and not the Big Fisherman on trial, and that trial is before Jesus. By his declaration, Peter was calling upon Israel’s elite to either embrace or reject his call to salvation through Christ!

The astute way Peter cut this issue placed Israel’s leaders in a real dilemma (vv. 13-22). By tying his preaching of the gospel of salvation through Christ to the healing of the paralytic meant that Israel’s leaders couldn’t attack the one while applauding the other! Yet, obviously, they couldn’t condemn Peter and John for the healing. The beggar was so well known to the Jewish worshippers (he sat outside the Temple entrance begging for alms for forty years) and was so obviously healed that the miracle can’t be ignored. Instead, it would be the talk of the town!

So what could Israel’s religious and political leaders do? They realized they dare not make an issue of it “because of the people” (4:21b). So all they could do was to ask the apostles not to preach in Jesus’ name. And Peter’s response to them was as well crafted, as was the astuteness of his use of power earlier.

“Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (vs. 19). In other words, Peter and John were saying to the Sanhedrin, “You must act in your own good conscience”, thus showing respect for their authority. “But we must do the same. And our good conscience is that we must “keep on speaking about what we have seen and heard”. You wouldn’t want us to be acting in any other way, would you?” Thus, by crafting their response in this way, Peter and John have avoided both a confrontational “no” to the Jewish elite while avoiding a compromising “yes”. Instead, they have bought more time for themselves to proclaim the gospel while demonstrating to the Powers that they were formidable opponents indeed who could use power very sophisticatedly.

The Jewish leadership was stunned by this encounter with the leadership of the earliest Christian church. As they “debriefed” on the experience, that leadership recognized that these “were uneducated and ordinary men” (vs. 13). Yet they also realized that these were far more formidable opponents than their lack of education had implied. Where did they learn to use power so astutely, so that they could turn the tables on the Power Elite and put them on trial? Then they realized that these men had been “companions of Jesus” (vs. 13) who had earlier confounded the high priest, harried the Pharisees and had reversed his trial before Pilate into a trial of Pilate. These men had been with Jesus! They had learned how to use power from him. And therefore, they were not to be taken lightly!

¹ R.C. Sproul, *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), p. 1565.

I John 3:16-24. America's first great philanthropist, Stephen Girard,² once wrote, "My deeds must be my life; when I am dead, my actions must speak for me!" Girard clearly understood that the truly authentic witness to a person's expression of love is not his words or intentions, but his deeds. As the old saying puts it, "What you do speaks so loudly that I can't hear a word you're saying."

The author of the first epistle of John understood this as well, when he wrote to the Church, "We know love by this: that Jesus laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (3:16-18).

How do we know whether our faith in Christ is genuine? We know in two ways, John tells us. First, we respond in love and commitment to the One who loved us and committed Himself to us – even Jesus Christ. Second, we know because we respond to both our brothers and sisters in Christ and to the whole world with that same Christ-love.

In the epistle lesson for today, John states that authentic Christ-centered and motivated love expresses itself in three ways. Believers "know love" (or, in other words, are awakened by Christ to love the world). Second, believers give their lives for others. Third, believers share their goods with the poor. These are the three indicators, John tells us, by which we know whether we have authentically responded to God's love given to us through Jesus Christ – we are awakened to God's love in our lives, we commit ourselves thoroughly to both believers and non-believers alike, and we put our money where our mouths are by sharing our wealth with the poor.

What is significant about these three indicators is that they are neither optional nor exclusive. That is, a number of indicators are not given; rather, there are only three. Nor can we choose between them ("Well, I'll love Christ but not share my wealth with the poor"). The signs of authentic love of Christ are the signs of commitment to others and generosity with those most in need. There are no other indicators of an authentic love relationship with Christ, John teaches us. Practicing love – especially towards those who cannot return it – is the prime indicator that one has the love of Christ within him!

It is a matter of love, not of faith. Being a Christian, John states, is not so much believing the right doctrines about Christ as it is being in a right relationship with Christ. It is more a matter of obedience to God's call of love to us than it is holding the correct theology. Although it is important to have correct doctrine, Christianity is ultimately a religion of the heart (that is, of our

² Stephen Girard (1750-1831) was America's first multi-millionaire (his fortune, in today's terms, would be worth close to half a billion dollars) that he had earned as a mariner, merchant and banker. Girard, who was a French immigrant, centered his philanthropy upon his adopted nation. This included founding and endowing a hospital to fight yellow fever in his adopted city of Philadelphia (he personally oversaw the care of the sick both at the hospital and in visiting the homes of the ill), underwriting 95% of the cost of the War of 1812 (\$5,000,000), and leaving his estate to create Girard College, an orphanage of Grades 1-12 to provide a superior resident education for male orphans (later expanded to females, as well), beginning in 1848. Since the 1940s, 90% to 98% of each graduating class goes on to college, with the school normally providing scholarship support. .

inner being) in tune with the heart of God. If we are at one with God, then that at-oneness will manifest itself in those actions that indicate that at-oneness – the actions that practice love in our treatment of each other, of the world, and especially of the poor (3:18-22).

So John concludes, “This is God’s commandment: that we should believe in the name of his Son 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. And by this we know that he abides in us – by the Spirit that he has given us” (3:23-24).

What is intriguing about this passage is that the word “in” is absent from the original Greek. Thus, John is actually saying, “we should believe the name of his Son Jesus Christ” (see the commentary on Acts 4:9-12 above for the significance of believing “the name”). Belief is not intellectual assent to a body of knowledge, but rather is a personal embrace of the One who loves us all the way to His death! The gospel is a gospel of embrace. And our response is to be our embrace of the One who died and rose again for us, lived out in our embrace of others -- particularly the rejected and despised of the world (cf. 2:7-8 and John 13:34—14:1) that draws us even closer to the embrace of Christ. It is when we live lives of embrace, even towards the most unlovable in the world – that “we abide in Christ, and Christ abides in us” (3:24). It is then that we are most filled with the presence of God and Christ in us (i.e., “filled with the Spirit”). For when we love the rejected and despised, then we show by that love-in-action that Christ is as alive in us as we are alive in Him.

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)
(Cycle B Oeasteride 4.doc)