

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 13, 2008

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

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In the high-ceilinged rotunda of the original hospital building at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore there is a statue of Jesus. It is like the one here at Redeemer, but enormous, simply huge. It towers over the space, standing with arms outstretched, looking down with compassion on everyone coming in and going out. The children of a friend who is a doctor on the Hopkins staff always wanted to come in that way to see the statue; they called it “Big Jesus.”

Big Jesus. That’s what Jesus is like in the Gospel according to John: bigger than life, powerful, speaking in lofty phrases, with great authority, and revealing the love and compassion of the Father by laying down his life to take it up again.

“I am the gate for the sheep,” he says this morning, comparing himself to the gate of a sheepfold that holds the sheep safely in, and is the way they pass through to reach green pastures. Through the door of his death and resurrection his sheep are free to come in and go out and find pasture.

Just after today’s passage, Jesus also says, “I am the good shepherd.” The image of Jesus as the good shepherd is one of the oldest and most loved in the Church. Jesus as a shepherd is often found in the baptistry in early churches. Churches with stained glass usually have a Good Shepherd window, and Redeemer is no exception. There he is sitting on a rock playing the lyre, with some very contented looking sheep sitting at his feet.

The Good Shepherd is an idyllic, comforting image of Jesus. But by the end of this tenth chapter of John, where Jesus continues to develop this image, you might be surprised to find that his opponents among the religious leaders have bent down to pick up stones and are ready to stone him. There must be something more to this image than strikes us at first hearing!

We are far removed from the world of sheep and shepherds today. We think sheep are silly creatures, not very smart. But what Jesus said about them—that they know the shepherd’s voice and follow him, but run from a stranger—is actually true. And they turn out to be still more intelligent than we might have suspected. A study done a few years ago showed that sheep recognize faces. They distinguish between the faces of other sheep that are very similar. (You mean all sheep don’t look alike?!) And they remember them over time. (National Public Radio. *All Things Considered*. November 7, 2001)

We are drawn to the caring and tenderness of the shepherd, as in the 23rd Psalm that gives comfort and reassurance. But we are not so familiar with the long tradition around shepherds that was well known in first century Palestine. In the Old Testament, YHWH was the shepherd of Israel. YHWH and Jesus, are called shepherd not only because they protect and care for the sheep, but on account of their *authority*.

The shepherd is the one to follow: “He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. . . . He guides me along right pathways for his Name’s sake.” The sheep know and hear his voice, they harken to him, they obey his commands.

The shepherd is the one who is absolutely, completely, unquestionably in charge of the flock. Kings, generals, priests are depicted as shepherds in the Bible. Remember King David, the shepherd king. Remember the religious leaders indicted by the prophets for being unfaithful shepherds who led the people astray.

When Jesus says, “I *am* the *good* shepherd,” this is not only to encourage his followers. It is also a challenge to the leaders of the community: he is claiming to have authority that replaces theirs, and authority over them. And when at first they don’t understand him, he gives it another try until they do. That’s when they pick up those stones to stone him.

This portion of the Gospel according to John, in which Jesus calls himself the shepherd and the door of the sheep, the good shepherd who calls his sheep by name and will lay down his life for them, comes between two stories we heard during Lent: the healing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Each story shows Jesus with authority and power to do unprecedented life-giving acts. “Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind,” the healed man said to the religious leaders. “If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.” (9:32-33) Likewise, only the greatest of prophets, Elijah and Elisha, had ever brought someone dead back to life—but never after four days.

In each instance, Jesus’ act—healing blindness, restoring life—evokes intense opposition from the authorities. The Pharisees drove the man born blind out of the synagogue. After Jesus raised Lazarus, they and the chief priests immediately planned to put Jesus to death, and Lazarus, too, because “many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.” (11:11)

His actions and authority were a threat to everyone in positions of power, whether religious leaders of Israel or imperial functionaries of Rome. No established authority wanted him around. He claimed his authority was greater than theirs. And, in reality, he did seem more credible than insane. There was no room for the Son of God to step into their system. He did not want to step into it, anyway, but to transform it by transforming human beings, us, by the power and leading of the Spirit, into a community of compassion and mercy. A flock to follow the Good Shepherd, to walk in his footsteps and become like him. To do even greater works than his own (14:12; 20:21)

The conflict between the established leaders and Jesus was a matter of authority, all along the way, and it still is. His authority is not limited to a spiritual, religious realm separate from the social-political-economic-cultural arena. There is no facet of life, individual or corporate, separate from the authority or the standard of God. We are answerable to God for all that we do and do not do.

At the end of the Gospel according to John, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,’ Peter answered. Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’” And a second time, after the same question and answer, “Tend my sheep,” Jesus said. A third time he asked, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’” (21:15-17) With authority, three times he said it.

As the Church we feed the hungry in many ways: in word and sacrament, in hospitality and fellowship, and with *food*. At Redeemer, we bring food for the food basket, make sandwiches and dinner for the homeless in Bethesda and Montgomery County. Support and participate in Street Church, Holy Eucharist and lunch in Franklin Square Park, feed the children who come here every week to be tutored. Individually we make contributions or volunteer with local and international organizations to feed the hungry.

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly,” Jesus said. That all may have abundant life, not that a few may live well while many do not have enough. And so we share. Not as radically as the church in Acts who “had all things in common . . . [sold] their possessions and goods and [distributed] the proceeds to all, as any had need.” But this is a generous parish, you are generous people.

All this is good, as it should be, absolutely necessary. But charity and outreach, however generous, cannot transform the level of hunger in our nation and around the world. Over 850 million people go to bed hungry every day.¹ Almost 16,000 children die from hunger-related causes every day, one child every five seconds.²

People sometimes say that religion and politics don’t mix. If they mean that the Church should stay out of partisan politics, Amen. Jesus did not support a political candidate or party, nor should the Church. But Jesus challenged the established leaders to greater justice and compassion.

Ending extreme poverty and hunger is the first of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Hunger is a religious issue, not just a secular one. That is why The Episcopal Church and this parish support the MDGs.

We know already the hope that development projects like John-Bosco’s tree planting in Burundi can create toward easing systemic problems that lead to widespread hunger. We know the work of Samaritan Ministry’s Next Step program that helps people break the cycle of poverty, hunger and homelessness and transforms lives.

¹ Millennium Campaign, at www.millenniumcampaign.org quoted in God’s Mission in the World: An Ecumenical Christian Study Guide on Global Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals (2006), p.31.

²Jack, Robert, Morris, Saul, & Jennifer Bryce. "Where and Why Are 10 Million Children Dying Every Year?" *The Lancet* 361:2226-2234. 2003.

Jesus fed 5,000 persons with a few loaves of bread and two fish. (Jn. 6:1-14) What might be the result if we began to educate ourselves about legislation pending in the Congress right now that can have an impact—positive or negative—on global poverty, hunger, or farmers in developing countries. What if we then wrote letters, emails, or even visited members of Congress to share our views on these important policies.

“Many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles” in Acts.
What wonders might the world then see and enjoy, if we did these things.
He came that all may have life, and have it abundantly.
Big Jesus just might be mighty pleased.