

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 25, 2010

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Parish Visits - I spent Friday and Saturday this week wearing my hat as a trainer in the Diocese of Washington's Church Development Institute, a course in congregational development. The week end was centered around visits to three Episcopal parishes in D.C., all founded in the second half of 19th century, all within a mile or so of each other—two of them only 7 or 8 blocks apart.

The purpose of our work was to observe the three parishes and develop an understanding of the distinctive culture of each one, with an eye to participants' becoming more aware of the culture of their own parishes.

The three we visited are all in the same Church, but their distinctly different expressions of Episcopal spirituality are evident in their styles of worship, approaches to spiritual formation, and patterns of responding and adapting to their environment and to change.

The group met with clergy and lay leaders in each parish. These hosts related stories of parish history, identity, and programs, and their sense of what is the heart of the parish. The participants asked lots of questions; we had a very long afternoon on Friday, and then hours afterwards, debriefing and processing. Our object was to identify the strengths and successes of each parish, and where their positive energy seems to be. Then we engaged in disciplined wondering about how each parish might build on its own strengths and high energy points.

It was striking to see, in the debriefing, how hard it was for some in the group to really see a parish that seems different from their own. The human tendency is to see everything through the filters of our own experience, values, likes and dislikes, around worship, architecture, music, leadership styles, organization, etc.—and not to realize that we're doing it.

It can be hard to look at difference without *defensiveness*: if "they" are different, maybe they are better, and there's something wrong with us. That can feel threatening. It can be hard to look at difference without *judgment*: if "they" are different, they must be bad. Keeping an appreciative stance, recognizing the vitality, strengths and positives can be a challenge. It's not hard to see how judgment and conflict can arise even in the small world of The Episcopal Church!

At the temple in Jerusalem - On a wintry day in Jerusalem, where it can get quite cold, conflict is heating up at the temple. This is a continuation—about round three—of a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees and temple authorities. It began after Jesus opened the eyes of a man blind from birth. (John, ch. 9)

There have been a series of sharp exchanges. The authorities have been refusing to believe what they saw and heard, questioning whether the man Jesus healed ever *was*

blind. They have interrogated him and even his parents. Finally they have driven the man out of the temple. (9:34). Out of sight, out of mind, perhaps. Round one.

In round two, Jesus contrasts himself with these leaders: “I AM the good shepherd,” he says; the others are thieves and bandits who come only to kill and destroy. The good shepherd cares for the sheep, whom he knows by name, who know him, know his voice, follow him. He lays down his life for them.

These may not exactly sound like fighting words to us. They were deeply troubling to Pharisees and Jewish leaders. Not so much the “thieves and bandits,” but definitely the claim to be the “good shepherd.”

Think of David, the great king of Israel who began life as a shepherd, from whose line the Messiah is to come. This is the source of the Jewish leaders’ demand, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” But even claim to be the Messiah—which Jesus does not directly make—is not so great a problem. The greater consternation comes because Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd—because the true shepherd of Israel is God himself.

As round two ends, these leaders are still divided. Some say Jesus has a demon, he’s out of his mind. Others question whether a demon can open the eyes of the blind.

Round three begins. They gather around him now—surround him, really. Enough of figures of speech about shepherds and sheep, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” they demand.

They are not looking for enlightenment. Not hoping to learn whether he really is the Messiah. Not trying to understand what he’s really about. Consciously or unconsciously, they are limited, their sight and insight dimmed by the filters of their own position, experience and expectations.

Just imagine how the conversation might begin if they *were* trying to understand:

Jesus, what we like about what you’ve been doing , what we find attractive about you, is that you bring joy (Cana), you feed the people’s hunger (feeding 5,000), you bring healing (man ill for 38 years, healed at pool of Bethsaida), you bring light and life (man born blind).

What concerns us, scares us, even, is what you say about yourself, about being the good shepherd, about being an agent of God, having a special relationship with God. That flies in the face of everything we understand about our own tradition. How are you the good shepherd? Tell us, show us more.

Something along those lines might lead to some understanding, to believing, belonging. But they are hoping only that he will give them a straight answer so they can bring charges against him. They are not going to connect—not in friendship, love,

believing or belonging; only in seizing, judging, condemning and handing him over to be crucified.

When Jesus tells them here, “The Father and I are one,” their earlier internal divisions are healed: they take up stones to stone him “because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.” (10:31) Not quite. He does not *make himself* anything. He is the Word of God who has become a human being. (Raymond Brown, 408) By the end of the whole encounter, they try to arrest him, but he escapes from their hands (10:39)

Easter - But, wait! This is Easter; week four, mid-point of the season. For the past three weeks, we have heard John’s accounts of the appearances of the risen Jesus: to Mary Magdalene, to the disciples in the locked room in Jerusalem and by the Sea of Galilee, where he showed himself to them for the third time.

How curious that we have cycled back, mid-Easter, to this conflict at the temple. What could this have to do with resurrection, with eternal life?

Held alongside Psalm 23, there is some sense to it. If Jesus is not already in the valley of the shadow of death here, he is nearing it. And see: he is not afraid. Surely he is in the presence of those who trouble him, yet he knows the abundance of the Father’s love, the intimacy of the Father’s presence.

While this is not a *resurrection* appearance, Jesus is *showing* himself, not only to the Pharisees and other leaders, but also to us, and to all who believe or hope to believe, to all who belong or hope to belong to him. He has been showing himself, and in himself and his works, he has been showing the Father, from the beginning. Here, he shows himself is as the good shepherd, who holds his sheep secure; who gives them eternal life.

Here in the portico of the temple he shows us that as we come to him, trust him, follow him, we already are in eternal life now—as he already is in eternal life, one with the Father, now. Even when surrounded by his enemies. Even, later, in betrayal, in trial, judgment, and crucifixion. We see him safe, even though rejected and killed. The cross and resurrection confirm that: just as no one could take his life from him, no one can snatch away the life of anyone who belongs to him.

He shows himself still, in the living Word . In the breaking of the bread. In the generosity, love and creativity of the community. In the suffering of the world, the great ordeal still suffered by too many of the world’s people who continue to die because they do not have enough to live; and in the lives of those who come to their aid.

Those who do not belong - What, though, of those who do not believe (“refuse to believe”/ Raymond Brown), who do not belong to his sheep? There is a clue to that here. It comes from the very ones who challenge and, finally, reject Jesus.

“How long will you keep us in suspense?” A literal translation is, “How long *do you hold our life/our soul?*” “In suspense” is implied. The Greek for soul and life is the same word (*psuche*). These opponents of Jesus do not realize what they are saying, even as they speak the truth.

Think about it; picture it. Jesus says about his sheep, “No one will snatch them out of my hand.” Here, the very ones who refuse him, without realizing what they are saying, show us Jesus holding their life, their soul, the life and soul of his enemies—who do not believe in him, do not come to him, do not belong to his sheep—in his hand.

Just as he holds his own, those who believe, follow and belong, perhaps?

And for how long? For as long as it takes? For eternity?

“In the beginning was the Word All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life” (1:1, 3-4). He has the whole world in his hands. For as long as it takes.

He holds all in love; with patience. He holds all as he holds us when our fears and our filters blind us and make us deaf, unwilling or simply unable to see and hear and serve him, in each other, in ourselves, in our enemies and those who trouble us.

Though we cannot hold them in love, he holds them for us, and for his sake; and he holds us, and holds those who refuse our love. The time *will* come when he will hold us all, together, in love. A great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages; all parties, all stripes, opinions and traditions. Whatever we believed or thought we believed, whatever we doubted or rejected.

The One who made us all will reconcile and heal all things in himself. The Lamb will be the shepherd and guide *all* to the springs of the water of life, and wipe away every tear from their eyes.