

3 May 2020

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:14a,36-41; John 10:10

That's a verse to commit to memory, friends. The last line of today's Gospel account: I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly. The old translation I like even better: I came so that they might have life, and have it to the full. Whenever you're making a decision and seeking God's will, whenever you are in the midst of change, whenever you might doubt the Lord's goodness and care for you, call it to mind. In fact, commit the citation to memory—it's an easy one: **John 10:10**. Jesus wants you to have an abundant life. Not a dull one, not a miserable one, not a petty one; a full one.

The catch is, in the Christian calculus of life, getting to fullness often needs to be preceded by emptiness and some suffering. If we'd gain ourselves, we have to lose ourselves, Jesus said in various ways, often and consistently. **If we want to be filled with Spirit, with the life-giving love of God, we have to make room for it and empty ourselves of pride, anger, greed...all those things that are not of God.**

We see that in the first reading very clearly. It ends joyfully with three thousand people receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit and being added to the People of God, the Church. But if you noticed **they didn't get there by just saying, "Yes I'd like the gift of the spirit and to be baptized."** First they were, in the words of the account, **"cut to the heart."** Before they were exalted into the joy of being baptized, living in the light of God's love and forgiveness, they had to feel the pain of their sins in their hearts. They were cut to the cut, when they heard Peter's accusation that they were complicit in the crucifixion of Jesus. Even though it said 3000 were converted that day I'm sure many more heard and did not have the courage, insight, and, mostly, humility, to admit they needed to repent. **It's not easy to let yourself be cut to the heart.**

I was remembering **part of King David's story**, I think, because of this. Last fall while away on sabbatical, I walked a certain path through the city of Bethlehem often. One day I told a resident where I had walked and he said, "You walked right by **David's wells!**" I had no idea what he was talking about. But I went back, and sure enough there was a sign marking three wells that unattractively had rubber hoses coming out of them, but the sign told the story of Second Samuel, chapter 23, when King David told people he was thirsty and longed to drink of the wells of Bethlehem, his home town. Though he was very near Bethlehem, he could not go there because he was old and because the Philistines controlled the area. Wanting to please their king, however, some soldiers broke enemy lines, at the risk of their lives, and brought back water from those wells. When David heard the story, he poured the water on the ground, refusing to drink it. "Could I drink the blood of these men who got this water at the risk of their lives?" **He put the lives of his men at a higher value than his thirst. He was a Good Shepherd to them.**

But **how did he get that way?** He wasn't always that way. Early on, he put one of his soldiers in a position of certain death so that he could have that man's wife, Bathsheba. But over time and **with the forceful confrontation of the prophet Nathan, he was cut to the heart, humbled, acknowledged his sin and had a new beginning** of loving people more than his own needs, greeds and ambition.

It's not easy getting to that place where we can be Good Shepherds to others. Even those we are closest to we can often use to our selfish ends. **Do we have friends because we truly care for them and want them to thrive or because without them we would be lonely?** Falling in love, the first stage, is

typically **being in love with someone else because they make us feel good**. It takes a lot of living, and learning and sacrificing to purify our love as really for the other person. I suppose as humans it's always a little of both—we are fulfilled when we love another person well. But it's a different kind of fulfillment than just getting our selfish needs, greeds and ambitions satisfied, right?

...which leads us to Jesus. He is the one presence who is pure love in our lives. He calls us by name; he will lay down his life for us. He loves us without condition and seek us out when we are lost. It is his love we imitate though we can never reach, very few of us, anyhow.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I want to close with a song written just a month ago by Michael Joncas for these days of coronavirus. He sees it as a song of tenderness to give us hope even when we're not feeling the love of the Good Shepherd. It's in three parts: past consolations, current trouble, and hope rooted in future deliverance. Beyond that, I'll let it speak for itself:

1. Shepherd and sheep, my God and I:
to fresh green fields you led my steps in days gone by.
You gave me rest by quiet springs
and filled my soul with peace your loving presence brings.

Chorus:

O shelter me, O shelter me:
the way ahead is dark and difficult to see.
O shelter me, O shelter me:
all will be well if only you will shelter me.

2. Yet now I tread a diff'rent way;
death dogs my path with stealthy steps from day to day.
I cannot find your peaceful place
but dwell in dreary darkness, longing for your face.

3. I will look back in days to come
and realize your faithfulness has led me home.
Within your house I'll find my peace,
trusting that in your mercy you have sheltered me.