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The Fourth Sunday of Easter always celebrates Christ as the Good Shepherd. This year, our readings focus more on the sheep than on the shepherd. In spite of the comforting image of Christ as Shepherd, today's Scriptures indicate that hearing the voice of the shepherd requires discernment, and that his followers can expect to receive the same treatment as he did.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles is more contemporary than we might expect as it reflects on how to discern God's ongoing action in history. Paul appeared as a foreign missionary who has left Jerusalem and the comforts of his home culture with its familiar, all-pervasive religious atmosphere. He was moving among his fellow Jews and their Gentile neighbors in Greek territory where one can find every variety of religious experience. The Jewish minority in that population had to be strong and stubborn to maintain their faith while surrounded by so many alternatives. They had every reason to be proud of their fidelity.

Then along comes Paul, retelling their sacred history to culminate in Jesus of Nazareth, presented as God's anointed one. Not only that, but Paul is offering his version of the faith to their pagan neighbors as if they could join equally with the chosen people in this new movement. That had to be astounding to most of them, and to many it came off as downright heretical. Those latter people, staunchly

faithful to their tradition, came to the conclusion that Paul was nothing more than an apostate Pharisee making the blasphemous claim that an executed criminal was the Messiah.

The Jews' rejection of the message left Paul deeply grieved. He was convinced that God had commissioned him to preach this Gospel to his own people and to the world. While he explained his anguish in detail in his letter to the Romans, in this story he simply warned the Jews that by disdain his message they were refusing the offer of eternal life.

While some who rejected Paul may have been caught up in trying to preserve their status or privilege, others were undoubtedly sincere, striving to remain faithful to their tradition. Whether for motives of self-interest or conscience, they agreed to persecute and deport Paul and Barnabas. So far, this story demonstrates that belonging to Christ, following the Good Shepherd, will often bring persecution and cause confusion.

The Jews who heard Paul faced a difficult dilemma: How could they discern if the new teaching they were hearing was of God? Unfortunately, Luke doesn't tell us what motivated people to reject Paul's message. Paul had carefully explained Jesus' life and mission in terms his fellow Jews would understand. He began by urging them to "remain faithful to the grace of God" and went on to remind them that God had always been active in their history, not just for their sake, but so that they could be a light to the Gentiles. The memory of Abraham and Moses and the prophets had every possibility of helping them see that Jesus fit and fulfilled the pattern of God's messengers. But some part of Paul's message was too much for them, just as Jesus' message had been too much for some of his Israelite contemporaries.

Perhaps their problem was what Pope Francis calls the "unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking" (*Evangelii Gaudium* #22). The message Paul preached called for openness to the new. It called for metanoia, the conversion that reorients lives. Metanoia always starts with confusion: the uncomfortable feeling that my truth may not be completely right. For the Jews who rejected Paul, it may have seemed easier to reject a new insight than to discern whether it was of God. In order to allow our religious convictions to grow, we must be convinced that God is bigger than our theology or spirituality. As Francis said in his letter to the U.S. bishops in January 2019, "At times of great confusion and uncertainty, we need ... to free our hearts of

compromises and false certainties, in order to hear what the Lord asks of us.”

This week’s readings remind us that following the Good Shepherd is often neither easy nor clear. The history of Israel and the early church remind us that God continually calls us to newness, to that which is greater than our expectations. Francis warns us that we must hold lightly to our certainties if we desire to hear the voice of the Shepherd today. The one thing of which we can be sure is that the Shepherd is always trying to lead us beyond where we are into greater, broader, deeper love — and that will often be unruly, confusing and new.

Acts 13:14, 43-52

Luke portrays Paul as a wonderful orator. From this, his first extensive homily in Acts (Acts 13:14-52), one can only imagine how the audience was enthralled. Paul possessed the ability to understand his audience and direct his message to their particular experience and perspective. In this discourse, he summarized salvation history so clearly and powerfully that people asked for more. That was one sure sign of his success as an evangelizer.

A second sign of success was that the traditional religious officials in the city were threatened by what he said. They were the preservers of the tradition, leaders who were proud of their role of protecting what the ancestors had taught. Their problem was that revelation had become a closed book; they couldn’t believe that God would do something new in their midst. Thus, they saw Paul as a blasphemer, not a prophet.

Paul’s encounter with the risen Lord had broken down the walls he had clung to as safeguards of the tradition. His comprehension of Christ was the most stunning and the central event of his life. The same thing happens to anyone who has an encounter with Christ — suddenly, a faith that had been traditional, intellectual, and/or pragmatic bursts into life as an experience of love. The creed one had accepted takes on a life of its own and changes the dynamic of the person’s life. This encounter is nothing short of an experience of falling in love — and it causes the same ongoing reorientation of life that comes from being in love.

True to his vocation as a Christian, Paul did not make himself an enemy of the traditionalists. His practice was to go first to the Jewish people to proclaim what God was doing. He joyfully received those who could accept it, and he accepted maltreatment at the hands of those who rejected him. Undoubtedly, he spoke with

great sadness when he said, “Since you reject [the word of God],” you “condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life.” It was as if he were saying, “It breaks my heart that the container you try to trap God in is too small. You make it impossible for God to give you life in Christ.”

Luke tells us that the Gentiles were delighted with Paul’s teaching that they were fully included in God’s plan. At the same time, the Jewish leaders incited people of means to harass Paul and Barnabas. Part of the problem was that a religious conversion could lead to social effects. If the leading people who maintained ties and influence with the leaders of the city converted, the stability and privileges of the Jewish community could have been in jeopardy. From the very earliest days, some people have recognized the fact that genuine Christianity will change a society — and those who are privileged by the status quo have the most to lose when that happens.

At the end of today’s selection, we hear three things: Paul and Barnabas were expelled from the city for preaching the good news; they shook the dust from their feet and proceeded on; they felt the presence and joy of the Holy Spirit. Having done what they could in faithfulness, they found themselves rejected as was Jesus, and they took that as a promise and confirmation of their ministry.

PSALM 100:1-2, 3, 5

We skip only one verse of this short psalm in today’s Liturgy of the Word. The refrain we sing refers specifically to the Gospel of the Good Shepherd, relishing images of God, the Creator of the universe, as a tender shepherd.

The first verse calls on all the earth to join in song to God. This reminds us of the sacramental character of song. As we invite the world to sing with us, we recognize the unique unity we create when we raise our voices together. The differences in octaves and the harmonies we sing create an audible experience of unity in diversity. Even those who don’t sing can be moved by the rhythm.

The second verse underscores the fact that the God who calls us together is the Creator of all. While we can neither invent nor limit God, we are all invited to accept God’s loving care. The third verse celebrates that care. God’s hesed — God’s covenant love/ faithfulness — is unending.

REVELATION 7:9, 14b-17

Last week's selection from Revelation emphasized Christ as "the Lamb." Now, John turns his attention to the people who make up the great multitude of the saved. This Sunday's selection tells us who they are, how they have acted, and what their future will be. First, in what follows nicely on the first reading, John describes a "multitude which no one could count," an unimaginably large gathering.

Added to their size is their diversity. Depicting them as representing every nation, race, people and tongue reminds the reader that God, the Creator of the entire universe, has gathered them together. Those who wish to participate in this celebration must leave behind the tribalism of their particular theologies and learn to appreciate God's universal will to save. While that sounds obvious, it has always been hard for humanity to welcome "others" as equals. But the message here is that God wipes away tears but preserves diversity.

What unites this multitude is not cultural, but what they have done: They have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. According to biblical scholar Diane Bergant in *Preaching the New Lectionary*, this phrase has a variety of potential meanings. It may indicate that these people have been redeemed by Christ's shedding of blood. It may refer to their participation in Christ's consecration through baptism. It may also recognize them as martyrs whose blood was shed like Christ's own. Each of these three interpretations describes a mode of union with Christ and a personal appropriation of his own union with the Father. Their participation in Christ, as Paul would say, is what brings them into the presence of God.

John says, "The one who sits on the throne will shelter them." He chose that word carefully to hearken back to the prologue of John's Gospel which explained that Christ "sheltered" or "dwelt" among humankind (John 1:14). This sheltering fulfills the purpose of the Incarnation: The word became flesh and dwelt among us so that humanity could dwell in God.

The next image in this selection depicts the Lamb as a shepherd. This explains the same idea from another angle. The Lamb who is one of the sheep and has given his life for them will shepherd them to the place where he dwells. Ultimately, this is a vision of the future offered to all humanity in all our diversity. The price of participation is nothing more nor less than a courageous and humble consecration in and with Christ.

JOHN 10:27-30

This selection from the good shepherd discourse complements today's first and second readings, reflecting on what it means to belong to Christ's flock, to be his own. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice." That is another description of the personal relationship with Christ that Paul proclaimed (Acts 13) to the people in Antioch of Pisidia. It is even more directly echoed in Revelation's statement that the Lamb shepherds the people who have washed their robes in his blood.

Each part of this short reading offers deep possibilities for reflection. First, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (*italics added*). This adds a dimension to John 10:14 in which Jesus said, "I know mine and mine know me." (*italics added*). We can hear intimations of the conversation on the Emmaus road in Jesus' reference to hearing his voice. Just as those disciples' hearts burned when they heard him, Jesus' flock resonates with his voice and message in a way that they do with no other. When he replaces "they know me," with "they follow me," Jesus is indicating how his own come to know him. This type of knowing is incarnate rather than intellectual. The Good Shepherd invites us to know him by walking his path.

The next section, "I give them eternal life," moves from discipleship to the effects of Christ's love for his own. This is the central teaching of the Gospel. Jesus says it in many ways, but sharing the life that cannot be overcome is the gift that comprises the mission of the Son, the work of the Shepherd. Jesus' own death and resurrection is the ultimate sign that nothing can overcome or overturn the love of God. As a shepherd, he insists that his only mission is to give life, the life that comes from being children of God (John 1:12).

The final segment of this Gospel moves into mysticism, the invitation to participate in Christ's own relationship with God. Jesus assures his flock that no one can take them from him because the God of the universe has given them to him. That is not simply a statement about God's power, but even more about God's love. It is God's will that we be united to Christ. Finally, as he explains that he and the Father are one, Jesus explains that to know him is to know the Father, to belong to Christ is to belong to the Father.

The reading from Revelation used the images of the lamb/shepherd, indicating that we are united to God by one of our own kind. This Gospel invites us to contemplate God's love for us as an invitation to follow the Shepherd into unending life and to belong to God. This is perhaps best explained in the doctrine of theosis, which

Orthodox theologian Christopher Veniamin describes in *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation: Theosis in Scripture and Tradition* as “the divinization of the entire human person in Christ ... acquiring the mind of Christ ... sharing his very life.”

Whether we choose the heady heights of Byzantine theology’s theosis or the simple image of Christ the Good Shepherd sharing his life with the sheep, the result is the same. We are always invited to hear his voice, to know him through following, and to receive eternal life. As the prologue to John’s Gospel explains, “To those who did accept him he gave the power to become children of God” (John 1:12).

Planning: Fourth Sunday of Easter

By Lawrence Mick

We reflected last week on the suffering that may come when we try to proclaim the good news in our society. Perhaps no dimension of that message will provoke more opposition these days than the perspective expressed in today’s readings.

In our first reading, Paul and Barnabas encounter opposition and “violent abuse” because they were preaching to Gentiles and inviting them to seek salvation through Christ. It got so bad that the two Christian preachers were expelled from the city.

Those opponents wouldn’t have liked our second reading either. John sees a vision of “a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue.” The idea that all nations can be saved was anathema to those Jews, who thought God belonged to them and only they belonged to God.

The Gospel today is less clear about the universal nature of redemption through Christ, but even here, we may assume that the flock of Jesus is bigger than any one nation or group.

The universal nature of God’s love and the teaching of Jesus that we are to love as God loves, even loving our enemies, have always provoked opposition. Human beings seem to have an innate tendency to separate into groups and to favor their group over everyone else. Then, they assume that God is on their side, so he must be against those other groups too.

We certainly see that tendency today, not only in our own country, but all around the world. We live in a rapidly changing world, and we have not learned how to cope with rapid change. That leads to fear and fear leads to hatred. We see that in our own political scene, and we can see it around the world as leaders stir up fear and hatred of “the other,” whether that means another race, another culture, another religion or people with another viewpoint.

Fear and hatred cannot be the principles on which Christians live and act. The mission of the church is to proclaim God’s love for all people and to foster reconciliation and healing in our world. Christ came to reconcile us to the Father and to one another, and Paul reminds us that Christ entrusted that ministry of reconciliation to us.

Planners can help the church embrace and carry on this mission. By choosing songs that pray for all peoples, we plant seeds of acceptance of the other in worshipers’ minds and hearts. By frequently crafting petitions that pray for those seen as threatening or different, we remind ourselves that God loves them all. By including music and art and ritual customs from various cultures, we remind ourselves that we are part of a universal church.

What other ways might help your people keep a global view that strives to match God’s universal love?

Prayers: Fourth Sunday of Easter

By Joan DeMerchant_

Introduction

Fear of the other is pervasive today, but it’s not new. The early Christians confronted it in preaching the Gospel and often paid a heavy price for their message. As hard as it may be to accept, God’s love is not limited to us and those with whom we feel comfortable. We, too, are called to reach out beyond borders and barriers of our own making. Why is this so hard for us to grasp, even now?

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you speak to all who are willing to listen to you: Lord, have mercy.

- Christ Jesus, your call is extended to all people: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you expect us to embrace all those in the circle of your love: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for our needs and the needs of all God's beloved people.

Minister For all in the church, that we may witness to and embody God's love for all people everywhere and in every circumstance, we pray:

- For the growth of tolerance in our nation and our world; and for the commitment to support all efforts that promote understanding of and respect for those who are considered different, we pray:
- For the wisdom to instill respectful attitudes, rhetoric and behavior in our children; for those who consider respect for others a weakness; and for those who work to combat all forms of bullying, we pray:
- For the honesty and humility to assess our biases, no matter how subtle; for the courage to heal wounds that our biases have caused or intensified; and for the will to challenge those who denigrate others, we pray:
- For women who have mothered, loved or believed in us; for women who care for others in impossible situations or whose caring is unrecognized, we pray:
- For those who find Mother's Day painful, those who mourn the loss of children or mothers, or those whose relationships with their mother was difficult, we pray: :
- For those among us who suffer from illnesses or conditions that are viewed negatively by others, we pray:

Presider Gracious God, your unbounded love and mercy extend to all living beings. Show us how to love others who do not fit into our comfort zones or who seem unacceptable to us. We seek the depth of love Jesus calls us to, and it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

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