

Sunday, May 3, 2020
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A)

John 10.1-10

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/831328890608872/>

(Sermon begins at about 11:20)

“Embracing Life Abundant”

We all recognize the imagery of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in today’s Gospel reading, even though he does not actually refer to himself as the Good Shepherd. He does not even go there until the next verse after the end of today’s Gospel. Rather, today Jesus introduces the concept in a more subtle way. It is a positive image of the shepherd caring for the sheep, leading them out of the sheepfold to green pastures and fresh water, leading them into the sheepfold at night to keep them safe from predators. Because of this care given the sheep, there is a profound trust in the shepherd that is given to no other: “the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” We understand precisely what Jesus is saying about himself and our relationship with him. That he is the Good Shepherd who takes care of us with love and tender care. Since most of us have heard numerous sermons on the subject, since many churches have paintings and stained-glass windows devoted to one of the most beloved images of Jesus, we are clear on the concept. No need to really belabor the point.

But if you look carefully at the text, there is something slightly amiss. After he talks about sheep and all the positive qualities of a shepherd, we are told, “they did not understand what he was saying to them.” For some reason, his original audience is unclear on the concept. Perhaps it is because of the audience Jesus is addressing—the Pharisees. Specifically, he is addressing the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees in their response to the man born blind, which we heard six weeks ago on the Fourth Sunday in Lent.

His concept is a good one and does have the potential to shed some light on the shortcomings of the Pharisees with respect to their lack of pastoral sensitivity in dealing with the man born blind and Jesus healing him—on the Sabbath, no less. That the Pharisees, like the man Jesus had just healed, are blind to their own condition. They were more concerned with the strict observance of the Law—of the rules and regulations prohibiting work on the Sabbath—than they were with the wellbeing of the man himself. That his healing, regardless of when it occurred, was the important thing.

But the Pharisees just don’t see it. They don’t get what Jesus is implying in his imagery. Oh, they get it on one level. They understand that in talking about sheep, Jesus is talking about the people. After all, this was a well-known image for the people of Israel—that they are God’s sheep, his flock. The problem is in the identification of just who the shepherd is in Jesus’ imagery. The Pharisees see themselves as being shepherds. Their job, after all, is to care for the spiritual wellbeing of the people. It is their job to lead their flock. They presume that the flock recognizes the authority of their collective voice and will follow. But that is as far as the imagery

goes when it comes to their interpretation. As Jesus is fond of saying elsewhere in the Gospels, the Pharisees are hypocrites. This is because the actions of the Pharisees are not consistent with their self-professed role. In actuality, they have little concern for protecting, caring for, and loving the people. Over time, the Pharisees had become more concerned with the observance of the Law and for their own wellbeing at the expense of the people. They attempt to lead the flock down a narrow path of adhering to onerous laws without concern for the physical and emotional wellbeing of those they lead. Particularly those who are most vulnerable.

When they don't get it, Jesus realizes that the Pharisees are thinking of themselves as shepherds, not strangers or bandits, as he intends. Those who, like bandits, disregard the Law, or seek to manipulate the Law for their own benefit. Meanwhile the Pharisees are thinking of Jesus as being a bandit. Someone outside their view of the Law who is trying to lure away the Pharisees' sheep. Given the differing perspectives, with each party (Jesus and Pharisees) thinking of themselves as the shepherd, the good guys; and the other as the bandit, the bad guys, they are at an impasse. They can all agree on who the sheep are. The problem is the identity of the shepherd—Jesus or the Pharisees.

So, in an initial attempt to chastise the Pharisees, Jesus is, unfortunately, being a little too subtle. He is hoping that they will get the message without him having to hit them over the head with a two by four. Without him out and out saying, "I am the shepherd and you are the bandits." When this initial attempt falls flat, Jesus decides to get a little more emphatic about what role he plays in all of this. In fact, he actually kicks it to a new level. "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep . . . Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture . . . I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus creates an image that the Pharisees would not think to claim for themselves. Perhaps one that they would not dare claim for themselves. That of the sheepfold gate.

One important thing to note about sheepfolds is that they were walled enclosures with a single point of entry and exit—a gate. The sheepfold was the place of absolute safety for the sheep, the ultimate example of love and care and protection for the sheep. Of providing what is not possible in the world outside the sheepfold. If the sheep are an image of God's people, where then, do they find such unlimited, such unconditional love and care? With God, of course. That being the case, the sheepfold could be seen as a metaphor for God himself. In Jesus casting himself as the gate to the sheepfold, he is really saying he is the single point of access to God.

This imagery of Jesus as the means of access to God is further accentuated by two points. The first is that "whoever enters by me will be saved." Even the Pharisees could not deny that salvation ultimately comes from God. And the second is that in serving as the point of access to God, Jesus "came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Only God can give life. In using this image of himself as the gate, as the access point to God, Jesus is emphasizing his ability to provide what the Pharisees cannot. His ability to provide what only God can. Salvation and life.

Not just any life. Abundant life. This is a bold claim. This is a bold promise. One that particularly grabs my attention in a time when we continually hear news of illness and death. Of diminished life and loss of life. At a time when we continually hear about potential economic ruin and the

loss of prospects for long-term wellbeing. At a time when we hear people lamenting the loss, or at least a temporary curtailment, of our way of life. Particularly at a times when life seems diminished in so many ways, Jesus' promise of us having life and having it abundantly is a beacon of hope.

So where is the abundant life that Jesus promises? Now to be clear, this abundant life that Jesus promises has nothing to do with financial or material abundance. Not that it can't or won't. Nor does it necessarily mean long life or excellent health. Not that it can't or won't. All these things are possible, although not necessarily as a direct result of Jesus' promise. If anything, such physical and material abundance would be side benefits of what Jesus is really talking about.

When Jesus promises abundant life, he is really talking about spiritual and relational abundance. That he will strengthen our bonds with him, with God, and even with one another. Those less-than-tangible things that scientific and psychological research show contribute to overall happiness and well-being. There are numerous studies out there about how people who have solid, supportive relationships are generally more satisfied with life, happier, and even live longer. There are similar studies out there about how people who are religious or have a strong prayer life or have an active faith are generally happier and even live longer. Of course, what this means is that we need to be receptive to and actively engaged in the work of building relationships, both with God and with one another.

So, what does this mean relative to where we currently find ourselves? The last couple of weeks I have read several articles and reflections that refer to our current circumstance as a "liminal space." Liminal space is an ancient concept among the Celts and other peoples that recognizes there are those times and spaces in our lives that are transition points from one way of being to another. The time and space between what was and what's next. Particularly spiritual growth. For the ancient Celts, this was characterized by the ordinary and the sacred bumping against each other in "thin places," where the ordinary can almost touch and be influenced by the divine, providing an opportunity, a catalyst, for growth.

Religious and spiritual experts are now recognizing that our current circumstance is a liminal space in which we have the unique, perhaps once-in-a-lifetime, opportunity to reshape our lives by shifting our priorities and our focus from what they had been to one that is more in tuned with what God seeks and desires for all his beloved children. Or, to put it into the language of today's Gospel, to seek and embrace the abundant life that Jesus offers and promises.

We are already seeing this happen among our own parish family. Because of the extra free time that many now have, many are engaging in more and new and different spiritual practices—the Daily Office, Centering Prayer, Bible Study. Exploring ways of strengthening your connection to and relationship with God. Because of the social isolation, people are intentionally reaching out and connecting with family, friends, and even parishioners they may not know that well. From what I am hearing, these are not just surface-level contacts, but deep and meaningful connection, which are strengthening existing relationships and establishing new ones. And there are those who have found and reached out to us, from both near and far, becoming part

of our virtual community, part of our extended St. Gregory's family. Because at such times, so many hunger for the deeper connections with God and with other like-minded and like-spirited people.

In these and so many other ways, we are taking the opportunity of this shelter-in-place time to focus on those things that are truly important to our lives of faith, to our lives as members of the Body of Christ. Taking the opportunity to open ourselves up to receive and to live into the abundant life that Jesus promises. It is my fervent hope and prayer that our efforts during this liminal time and space take root and become a permanent part of who we are, individually and collectively. That we embrace the abundant life Christ offers and continue to live it and share it on the other side.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!