

This Sunday's texts:

Acts 4:1-12

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

By His Authority

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The holy Gospel for today comes to us from the Gospel of John the tenth chapter:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock with one shepherd. The Father loves me because I sacrifice my life so I may take it back again. No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily. For I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also to take it up again. For this is what my Father has commanded.

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, we need you to strengthen our faith. We need you to open our hearts and minds to discern the promptings of your holy spirit that we might follow you in our lives. We pray that you would help us to discern opportunities to stand for you, to show your love to one another and to others, that we might give you honor and glory through the

sharing of your love and the resurrected life that you give to all believers. Bless us this day, in Jesus' name. Amen.

John 3:16, that most familiar passage of scripture, reminds us that "for God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life," John 3:16. So it's interesting that this same writer, John, in his letter, 1 John 3:16 says something so closely to that same beloved verse from the gospel. He says in 1 John 3:16, "We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give our lives for our brothers and sisters." Jesus' death on the cross demonstrates for us what real love is. As followers of Jesus, as disciples of Jesus, we recognize that this is how love is expressed through this sacrifice.

Now I do want to point something out because I find that some of my friends like to read past the language that is in the scripture when especially it talks about brothers and sisters. When, in the New Testament, the phrase "brothers and sisters" is brought up, it's talking about brothers and sisters in Christ. It's talking about the church. And here, we are encouraged to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Now I don't say that because we're supposed to *not* love or *not* give up our lives, *not* sacrifice, for those outside the faith, but I want us to understand that the community of faith and how we act in relationship to one another *inside* the church is a part of the important witness we give to those *outside* the church. And sometimes, within the family, we're even more prone to bickering and arguments. Oftentimes, when this is viewed from the outside, it's not seen as love, support, and encouragement. So we want to remember that we're called by Christ to love our brothers and

sisters in the faith, as well as be a witness to those that are not yet people of faith.

We are called to give ourselves away as an expression of love. 1 John also says this in verse 23, “And this is his commandment: We must believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another.” Faith transforms. Faith in Jesus and in his love for us empowers us then to love one another. We don't love others because of what they do, because of who they are, or what they said, or what they've done for us. We love others because God first loved us. There's a transformation that happens in our hearts when we are embraced by the love of God that is empowering to us and that allows us to love one another and even to love one another in such a way that we see one another through our struggles, through our feelings, through our shortcomings. Not to accept wrong and just pretend it doesn't exist, but to stick with people while they work things out, while they struggle with the challenges that come in their lives, in their relationships, and even in their relationship with God. We help people. We stand with them and walk with them through their doubts and uncertainty, through their faith crises, as well as their faith celebrations.

I love this phrase. “Lost people matter to God.” And so, lost people matter to *us*. It's not simply that we love within the body of Christ. It's important, in fact, for us to recognize that sometimes our lives get very insulated. Sometimes we look around ourselves and the majority of our friends and associates, the people we hang out with, are fellow members of our church. We spend so much time *inside* the church that we often don't even recognize the difference from those who are outside the church. But lost people matter to God and, therefore, lost people should matter to us.

Not just as a notch on the belt that we can check off if we get them to come into the church, but rather, because they need to know that forgiveness and new life is available to them through Jesus. They need to understand that God offers himself to live in their hearts, to abide with them and in them, to bring their life to the fullness that was intended for them when he created them.

1 John 4:7 and 8 was a song that I learned in vacation bible school when I was little. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. He that loves not, knows not God for God is love.” We are to believe in Jesus and love one another. Right faith allowed to transform our hearts.

It's a challenge. We sometimes think that we're good if we just have our doctrine right. We're good if we just believe the right things, if we just confess the right things. But our head and our heart and our hands are all of one body. It's not okay with God for us to say the right things if we're not actually doing the right things. I've heard the phrase “I can't hear you. Your actions are speaking too loudly.” So part of what we do in sharing the love of God is we demonstrate it. Sometimes we demonstrate by being helpful. Sometimes we demonstrate by providing. Maybe someone's hungry and we provide them food, or they need a ride, or they're lonely and we visit.

But there's another element to love that is important for us to consider. And maybe the first is this. Do we love people enough to listen? To get to know them? To begin to understand their hearts and their struggles and their stories? So that we're friends. So that there is that connection of shared and common story that binds us together and that, in some times and some places, earns us the right then to be heard.

We live in a world and in a culture that often tells us that it's not a good thing to talk about faith. Sometimes we even work in places that have rules against sharing our faith. But I will tell you often we interpret the rule more strictly than the rule actually states. Most of those rules are rules that say we can't proselytize. We can't be telling people what they have to believe or we're condemning them. Often the rules give room for answering questions. Often the rules give room for us to share out of our own experiences or activities in our lives. People can begin to hear, even in those settings, the reality of how faith impacts our lives. They can hear a witness, if you will, that is not a proselytizing, that is not a seeking to get them to pray the sinner's prayer at that moment during our work hours. And it isn't a condemnation thing. It's just a way to let people see that we know God loves us, we know God loves them, and if they would like to talk to us about it in other times and places, we're ready to listen and we're ready to share.

In the New Testament, one of the things that we see is that it was hard for the followers of Jesus to share their faith. They received lots of opposition and many of them were even killed for their faithfulness to the gospel. In our Acts story today, we have the beginnings of seeing that is true, not only in Jesus' life, but after Jesus' death and resurrection. While Peter and John were speaking to the people, our Acts lesson tells us, they were confronted by the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and some of the Sadducees.

In the New Testament, we see a lot about the Sadducees and a fair amount about the Pharisees. One of the things we want to remember is that there is a difference. There was even some conflict between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees, not mentioned in our text, didn't really have a problem with belief

in the resurrection. They embraced it. The Sadducees, however, did not believe in the resurrection and so this conflict lived on. So when the disciples started talking about resurrection being available to all who believe in Jesus, the Sadducees were furious. There's even a joke, by the way, that you can remember that the Sadducees are the ones that don't believe in the resurrection because they're *sad, you see*. I know you're not here, so just laugh and we'll be okay.

Jesus reminds us in the Gospel lesson today, he says “I am the good shepherd. The Good Shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep.” And then he draws a distinction. “A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming.” But a good shepherd will stay and protect his sheep. There are many ways we could go with this text to address the sermon this morning. On the one hand, we can recognize that Jesus is our good shepherd. He will stand with us in moments of confrontation, like he did for James or for Peter and John. He will do that for us as well in our own lives when we're confronted, when sharing faith is hard. Jesus will abide with us to give us peace and the Holy Spirit will give us words to share the good news of the Gospel in gentle, loving, and yet bold ways.

But just as the good shepherd doesn't run away at times of danger and struggle, we're also encouraged to be like the good shepherd, to not run away when it gets difficult, to not hide our faith from those who we know, and they have even told us, they don't want to hear it. Now we're not to be confrontational. Even if they're confrontation to us, it doesn't mean we have to confront them back. It just simply means we stand by what we believe. It may even mean that we respond by showing love, even to their anger, disappointment, or frustration. It may mean that we stand firm in the love we have from God, even in the midst of hatred that might be expressed from them to us. But even as Jesus on the night

he was betrayed showed his love for us, when people are betraying or belittling us, we have the power of God in us to allow us to show love to them in the midst of that. Our actions and our reactions will show that we belong to the truth, so that we can stand confident before God and before them.

There's another verse in this lesson. In verse 20, it says this, "Even if we feel guilty, God is greater than our feelings, and he knows everything." (1 John 3:20). Boy, I'll tell you I want to grab that section of that verse, "God is greater than our feelings" because so often my feelings run rampant. Maybe I'm a little low on sugar, maybe I'm tired, maybe I didn't sleep well or maybe my feelings got hurt by something somebody said and all of the sudden, I'm in my curmudgeon mode. I need to be reminded that God is greater than my feelings. Or, and I think this is more appropriate to what this verse is saying, maybe I'm recognizing that I've done something wrong or that I failed to do what I'm supposed to do and I feel guilty. This verse is reminding me that my stance before God isn't based on how I feel. It's based on God's steadfast love and faithfulness. So God's love then can move my feelings and I can see others who are having a difficult day, who are low or discouraged or feel bad and I can bring that word of love to them, hoping that God's love will elevate their feelings.

Our world sometimes tells us that the truth is how we feel. I want to argue that that is not the case at all. God's love is the truth. His forgiveness and mercy are the truth. His love, expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, is the truth. And they can change our reality, and they can change our feeling, and they can change the way we think and understand, and the way we see and respond to the world around us.

In fact, in this language, we hear this, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” (Psalm 118:22). God could have rightly, with pure judgment, judged those who crucified Jesus. It would make every logical sense, but instead, he responds to that rejection of the crucifixion of Jesus by making Jesus the cornerstone upon which eternity is based, the cornerstone upon which God's love is demonstrated. How do we then demonstrate that same love in our presentation of the love of God in Jesus? I'll tell you I don't think we do it through argument. I don't think we do it in battle. I think we do it in acts of kindness. I think we do it by listening first. I think we do it by boldly letting it be known what we believe and how we've experienced the love of God in our lives.

The Bible teaches and it is clear that there is salvation in no one else. God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. So if we're talking to people that don't know Jesus, if we're talking to people who are not people of faith, there is a name by which they can be saved. There is a source from which they can receive mercy and forgiveness. That's Jesus. We need to have the courage and the gentleness and the inside for the right time to tell them that truth. To not let our fear cause us to back down, to not let their confrontations to cause us to back down, but to find ways, in fact, to demonstrate the truth of God's love for them, even as it is true for us. Luther's phrase was correct. One beggar telling another beggar where to find food. One forgiven sinner telling another sinner where to find forgiveness. One loved, broken person telling another broken person where the source of love and life is. In Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.