Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B – Good Shepherd

I knew an old priest years ago when I was the music director of a small Roman Catholic parish. He was a short little man. I found him one Sunday when I arrived early, sitting in the front pew in his white t-shirt, without his toupee, reading through his homily. He was filling in at our church one Sunday that happened to be a feast of Mary – and I will never forget his homily that day. He said, “The artists have done us a disservice, I think, with all the beautiful depictions of the Madonna and Child, with pictures of Mary crowned as Queen of Heaven. Mary was like us. Mary was a mother and a housewife. So where are the pictures of “Mary of the sweeping broom?” or “Mary of the dirty diaper?” Those would be more real than the others – and more approachable.

I have some of those same feelings about this Sunday that we celebrate today as “Good Shepherd” Sunday. Every year on the 4th Sunday of Easter, our readings give us a depiction of Jesus as the Shepherd. And the picture that probably immediately comes to mind is of a Jesus with European features, long flowing hair, holding a lamb around his neck – or perhaps carrying a lamb in one arm and a shepherd’s crook in the other. It’s very “pastoral” – a lovely depiction that is comforting.

But anyone who has been around sheep much knows that if you are caring for sheep, you will smell like it. We had up to 30-head of sheep at Emmaus Monastery at one time. If you have sheep, there is a barn to muck out, and ewes who have trouble giving birth. You may have to get very intimate, and put your arm in somewhere you’d rather not to pull that little lamb out. And when you hold that lamb in your arms, you will get dirty. There is an intimacy between the shepherd and the sheep that does not show up in those pastoral paintings. It’s an intimacy Pope Francis urged when he spoke to priests last year on Holy Thursday. “This is what I am asking you,” he said with emphasis, looking up from his prepared text, “be shepherds with the smell of sheep,” – Just for these moments, then, I’m asking you to let go of that romantic picture of the Good Shepherd that is taking up your mental picture wall, and go with me into another image of Shepherd that we’re given today.

The gospel passage we have today is from John, the “odd” gospel, the mystical gospel. John’s gospel has two main messages that he keeps putting forth in different ways. The first is that Jesus is God made flesh, Jesus is one with God, and one with us. And so if we abide – if we live – in Jesus, then we live in God, and God in us. The second message of John’s gospel is the clear commandment Jesus gives: “Love one another, as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life…”

The gospel passage we have today brings us those same messages. The second message is very apparent. It’s in the second sentence of the Gospel: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” The first of John’s messages, though, is present in the very *first* sentence, when Jesus says, “*I am* the Good Shepherd.” Multiple times in his Gospel, John has Jesus making “I AM” statements. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the vine, you are the branches. And every time John puts those words “I AM” in the mouth of Jesus, he is referring us back to God’s revelation of God’s name to Moses in the burning bush. When Moses asks, who shall I tell them sent me? God answers, “I AM.” So when John has Jesus say, “I am the good shepherd” – he is telling us again that Jesus is God revealing Godself to us. But there is another way that Jesus is identifying himself with God here – just by calling himself the “good shepherd.”

Psalm 23 is no doubt the most popular psalm we have. In modern parlance, we could say it is a meme! The Lord is my Shepherd… And all the people hearing the words of Jesus as given to them in John’s gospel would immediately make the connection. Ah, he is saying HE is our shepherd… HE will lead us beside still waters… When Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd, he is saying again that he and God are one. HE is that shepherd, the Lord, identified in Psalm 23. He is the manifestation of what that Shepherd of Psalm 23 looks like in human flesh.

And then Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the father.” Jesus is describing that intimacy between the shepherd and the sheep. It’s the intimacy between Jesus and the Father, an intimacy into which we are invited.

Yes, this shepherd image cuts away from that beautiful picture conjured up in our mind’s eye. The artistic rendering, as romantic as it might be, does not give us that intimacy. And it does not give us the next line: “And I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Today’s Epistle is from First John – which some scholars look on as a sort of commentary on the Gospel of John. And John lays it out here for us: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” - Yes, there is no greater love than this, to lay down one’s life… and we are called to do the same. Where did that come from? Why ought we do lay down our lives also? Because that’s what Jesus commanded: Love one another, as I have loved you. And how he loved us was to lay down his life.

We usually thing of Jesus laying down his life as the literally laying down his life on the cross – and so when we hear that we, too, are to lay down our lives, we might want to dismiss that. Which of us might really be called to sacrifice our life for someone else? - Actually, it’s more common than we might want to think – both in the past and in our own day. The school teacher or coach who shields his students and dies from a gunshot. The persons in the civil rights movement who were killed for standing up for the rights of *all* people. The churches that are burned or vandalized because they dared to speak truth to power or to stand against injustice. If we really want to follow this Jesus, we have to know there may be consequences, yes?

But “lay down one’s life” is most often much more mundane than that. And First John cuts right to it: “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” Laying down my life means laying down, letting go, of the notion that my life, my concerns, should be my priority. Laying down my life may be as simple of letting go of my preference for what we’ll have to eat for dinner and letting the kids choose. Or it may be as complex and difficult as taking a stand for what I believe is right when I know others will disagree and might think less of me for it. Laying down my life may mean going to visit someone in the nursing home when I’d rather watch the baseball game on TV. Laying down one’s life means finding a way to make the love of God real, a way to put the Love that is God into the flesh in action that is you.

We are each and all called to be the shepherd, you see. We are each and all called to be shepherd. We heard Jesus say at the end of this morning’s gospel passage, “I have received this command from my Father.” And on the second Sunday of Easter, we heard him say, in this same Gospel, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

“How does God’s love abide in anyone who had the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” How, indeed?

Let us look at Psalm 23 this week. Let us see who the good shepherd is, who we are called to be. Do something for those who are “in want.” Be a calming presence for those who long for still waters. Revive the souls of our families. Be a companion on the journey with those walking difficult paths through sickness or grief. And spread a table of kindness for those who are troubled, and maybe even for those who trouble us. Then we can trust that goodness and mercy will follow us. Then we will be dwelling – we will be abiding – in love, in God, and God in us.

May it be so. Amen.

* [Acts 4:5-12](http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html#ot1)
* [1 John 3:16-24](http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html#nt1)
* [John 10:11-18](http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html#gsp1)
* [Psalm 23](http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html#ps1)