



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Love of a Good Shepherd

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 25, 2021

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Based on Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

We are in the four hundred and eighth day of the COVID-19 pandemic by my accounting. For me, it first became real on Friday, the 13th of March last year, when we made the decision to cancel in-person Sunday worship because of the outbreak.

Since then, there have been more than 570,000 deaths in the United States (873 people died just yesterday) and more than 3 million deaths worldwide.ⁱ The numbers are mind-numbing, and I continue to repeat them in an almost liturgical way so that I do not—so that we do not—easily forget what we have experienced or what we have lost. We can see the end of this struggle, but we have not reached it yet, and this experience has changed us in ways we're only just beginning to comprehend.

About 40% of the US population has received at least one shot, and now roughly 1 in 4 is fully vaccinated.ⁱⁱ Plans are being made for a fuller reopening of New York and other cities, and along with it, our beloved parish will soon be available for in-person worship. I try not to use the term “re-open,” because St. Bart's has never been closed. We've been open, doing the mission and ministry of the church, every single day since the pandemic began. We've been caring for the lonely, the sick, and the dying through pastoral care and visitation. We've been feeding the hungry through the Crossroads ministries. Our preschool has operated under enhanced pandemic protocols. We've been educating and worshipping and doing all the things this community of faith has been doing for the past 186 years that we've been in existence. The building is not, and never has been, the church.

We're still in the midst of this struggle, to be sure, but it isn't too early to ask what we have learned and how we have been changed. Canon Stephanie Spellers new book, *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community*, describes a church which has been violently affected by this moment: broken open for greater service, shattered in humility, and forced to reassess what true commitment to Christ means.

That reassessment is happening at the personal level for many of us as well.

- I'm more aware of the importance of family and friends.
- I have missed people in ways I have *never* experienced before.
- I've felt loneliness in ways which are difficult for me to describe.
- I'm more aware of my own fragility. (You just can't be a witness to so much death without becoming more aware of your own mortality.)

And I see people all around me asking foundational questions about how they want to live out their lives and their vocations going forward. This has been no ordinary time, and I'm hearing from so many of you that this has been a time of transformative change that you're trying to understand as well.

Separate from the virus, but perhaps magnified by the circumstances, we have seen the largest civil rights movement in this country since the 1960's. George Floyd's death, fortuitously witnessed by a teenager with a cell phone camera, was the flashpoint for people from all over the nation (and, indeed, from all over the world) who said, "This is not right. This cannot continue."

The guilty verdict, handed down this past week to the former police officer accused of being primarily responsible for Mr. Floyd's death, is no cause for celebration. Young people of color continue to die at the hands of the police at far too high a rate. Systemic change must come to law enforcement practices so trust can be rebuilt in the ability of the police to "serve and protect" everyone. Still, there was a small moment of hope that a corner may have somehow been turned. We can hope and pray.

The Great Awakening was a religious revival that took place in the 1730's and 1740's in the American colonies. Led by preachers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, it focused on the sinfulness of humanity and the possibility of salvation through confession. Preachers emphasized that people could have a direct and emotional connection to God. The movement also suggested that religion shouldn't be formal or institutionalized, but casual and personal.

It was a movement that shook the Christian movement to its foundations. This morning I would like to suggest that we are undergoing another Great Awakening.

- It is an awakening that reasserts the values of equality and diversity.
- It is an awakening that promotes a conversion from consumerism and consumption to a life based on meaning and service to others.
- It is an awakening that takes more seriously our stewardship of this fragile earth, our island home.

One of the advantages of providing your children with a great education is that you get to watch them have educational experiences you wish you had been given. When my son was in seventh grade, a brilliant teacher led his class through a year-long pursuit of the question, "What does it mean to be human?" I was so envious. I believe the questions we're asking today go to the very core of what it means to be human.

As a part of this Great Awakening, as a part of being human, one of the most soulful questions we ask is, "Am I loved? Am I truly and genuinely loved by God?" In other words, do we have ultimate worth? Are we cherished? Now some might quickly respond, "Well, of course we're loved! Of course, God loves us!" But if we really believed that were true, why would we continue to long for so many other things which indicate we are not fully convinced? Why do we continue to doubt it, deep in our hearts?

There's always a lot of pious talk about love in the Church. Christians speak about love all the time. We talk about loving God. We talk about how God loves us. We talk about loving our neighbors as ourselves. We talk a pretty good game when it comes to love, but we seldom dig deeply into the questions of divine love. We too seldom talk about the repercussions of love; the complexity of it. We only occasionally address the parts of love where love becomes impossibly difficult, or necessarily self-sacrificing, or completely inexplicable.

We're at a clear disadvantage in these conversations, in part, because in English, "love" is often used as a soft and squishy romantic word. Where we, in English, employ one word for love, other languages

(notably Greek) use several. Love *can* be soft and amorphous, but it can also be a difficult, durable word, every bit as hard as the hard wood of the cross, that impossibly paradoxical symbol for God's love.

Any priest engaged in premarital counseling, that most optimistic of all pastoral responsibilities, has sat across from a genuinely dear couple who are completely in love and absolutely clueless. And it's not their fault. They simply don't know what they don't know. How could they? They can't be expected to know what love will be for them in 40 or 50 years, because they haven't yet made such an arduous journey. They haven't yet learned the indescribable joys and the unspeakable costs of long-term love. They haven't sat with a loved one as they suffer with a debilitating illness. They have not yet been betrayed and grievously wounded. Time, as the old saying goes, will take care of all that for them.

Part of our need and our desire for love (and even our capacity for love) comes from how we have been loved. Those of us fortunate enough to have been born into families who cultivated a great capacity for love, families who made it clear their love for one another was as certain as the North Star, soon come to realize what an enormous gift they've been given.

And, those of us who have been born into complex, dysfunctional, or angry family systems come to realize how hard we have to work to obtain what comes so comparatively easily to others. When love comes wrapped in the form of a physically or emotionally abusive parent, someone who constantly says, "I love you," while exhibiting the most destructive kinds of behavior, it's difficult to trust that any love, even God's love, could be reliable or worth the risk. In the First Letter of John, the author writes, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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?"

We may find it difficult to trust the love of God, but make no mistake about it, as love is depicted in the New Testament, it is a high-stakes, no-holds-barred kind of love that makes a radical claim upon our lives. God gave the most precious piece of Godself for us and then, and then, God invites us to do the same for one another.

In liturgical worship, we read most of the Bible Sunday-by-Sunday across a 3-year calendar. But in all three of the lectionary years, the Gospel reading for this Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is taken from the tenth chapter of The Gospel According to John: the well-known "shepherd discourse," which depicts Jesus as the "good shepherd." The reading of the 23rd Psalm on this Sunday also reminds us that God provides like a true shepherd.

Agrarian images are so much more difficult to understand in a culture that is no longer agrarian. The metaphor of the Good Shepherd requires a lot more interpretation in the 21st century than it ever did in the 1st. Most of us don't know any shepherds. Even fewer of us have actually been shepherds. We can imagine, theoretically, the life of a shepherd, much as we can imagine the life of an astronaut or a fortune teller. That is to say, we comprehend the work generally, but we don't really understand the details or the nuances. And, if we attempt to shift the metaphor to something else, like say, "The Good Care Giver" or "The Good Overseer," then we lose even more in the translation.

A shepherd holds the responsibility for protecting the flock. We also know the shepherd dwells with the flock, day and night, providing for its constant needs. There is something about living close to the flock that is so different from caring for them from afar. A good shepherd is cold when the flock is cold, wet when they are wet, and hot when the flock stands under a sweltering sun. The shepherd is personally connected to the welfare of the flock. A fellow bishop once told me, "I never trust a shepherd who doesn't smell like the sheep."

In her sermon *The Voice of the Shepherd*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of an acquaintance who had actually grown up on a sheep ranch and could dispel the myth that sheep are dumb. It was actually the cattle ranchers who started that rumor, because sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear with shouts and prods from the cowboys. But that doesn't work with sheep. If you stand behind sheep making noises, they will just run around behind you. They actually prefer to be led. Cows can be pushed; sheep must be led.

Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else, their trusted shepherd, does not go first, to show them that everything is all right. Taylor writes, "Sheep seem to consider shepherds part of the family, and the relationship that grows up between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to."ⁱⁱⁱ

- When the sheep are thirsty, the shepherd guides the flock to a source of water from which he, too, will likely drink.
- When they need shade, the shepherd finds a stand of trees.
- When the sheep must move, the shepherd guides them in the way they should go; and, when the sheep must stop and rest, the shepherd finds a safe place to stand watch over them.
- There is a closeness, an interconnectivity with these creatures, and the shepherd comes to know them so well that he can distinguish the cry of one from that of another, and the sheep become familiar with the shepherd's voice as well.

I was on sabbatical at St. Deniol's library in Wales where I heard a story about a young teacher from an industrial city in the north of England, who had accepted a temporary job teaching a class of four-year-olds way out in one of the most isolated, rural parts of north Wales. One of her first lessons involved teaching the letter "S." She held up a big, color photo of a sheep and said, "Now, who can tell me what this is?" No answer. Twenty blank and wordless faces looked back at her.

"Come on, who can tell me what this is?" she said, tapping the photograph determinedly, unable to believe that the children were quite this ignorant. The twenty little faces became apprehensive and even fearful as she continued to question them with mounting frustration. Eventually one brave soul put up a tiny, reluctant hand. "Yes!" the teacher cried, waving the photo aloft. "Tell me what you think this is?" "Please, Miss," said the boy warily, "is it a three-year-old female Border Leicester?" The kid knew his sheep!

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The Greek word translated "good," *kalos*, means something more like "model" than simply "good." I am the model shepherd. I am the iconic shepherd. This is Christ's way of telling us, in just one more way, that we are loved, and this is how we can know love. "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another." The author of First John, a sermon more than an epistle really, suggests that what we know about love—in fact the most crucial thing we know about divine love—is that Christ gave his life for us. Christ was willing to give us everything. What else do we need to know?

Right now, we are being cracked WIDE open. We are going through a Great Awakening. Let us grow more and more to trust this shepherd who stays with us no matter what. Let us discover we are loved more deeply than we have ever realized, more than we could ever merit, more than we can ever comprehend. And let us understand that we can know for sure we are loved, because it was Christ, the Good Shepherd, who first loved us and loves us still.

Amen.

ⁱ *Center for Disease Control* website, April 24, 2021

ⁱⁱ *Johns Hopkins University Study*, CNBC www.cnbc.com, April 21, 2021

ⁱⁱⁱ *Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, c. 2008, p. 450

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