

May 12, 2019, the Fourth Sunday of Easter
St. Thomas' Episcopal Church
Sermon by Rosalee T. Glass

John 10:22-30

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

Happy Mother's Day to all mothers, and thanks to Rev. Lisa for asking me to preach on this special day. It is a day of celebration of relationships of love. It is a day to honor mothers and the relationship of love between Mothers and children. Coincidentally, it is Good Shepherd Sunday, when we celebrate the relationship of love between Jesus, the Shepherd of souls, and us, his sheep.

This day, the fourth Sunday of Easter has come to be called "Good Shepherd Sunday" because the Gospel read on this day every year is a portion of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John. The tenth chapter is a clear metaphor about Jesus as the divine incarnate shepherd for us, his sheep. This is a shepherd whose being and actions are at one with God the Father and in God's way of love.

We heard in today's reading Jesus trying to explain his identity as the good shepherd. He is besieged by a crowd who want to pin him to their own agenda. This happened to him frequently. This crowd was prodding him into saying that he was the Messiah---a powerful ruler of Israel as King David had been centuries before. They expected this new Messiah to come to Israel as King David had, anointed by God with worldly power to defeat Israel's political enemies. Jesus was not that kind of shepherd and this crowd were definitely not sheep who followed him,

We are not surprised about this kind of harassment and questioning that confronted Jesus. It happened to him all the time. The Palestine of Jesus' time was a melting pot of many competing religious and political interests. There was an atmosphere of division, hate, mistrust, and oppression.

In our world today, we are unfortunately contending with an atmosphere like that. We see the divisions between and among people hardening. But it's not only that; what is more worrying is that, in the face of differences, hate is replacing tolerance and kindness.

We see people, especially young people with no community, no compass or anchor, set adrift in an increasingly chaotic world. Some are enticed, often through Internet sites, into membership in groups that have extremist ideologies and agendas of hate and violence. These disaffected youth find in these groups simple, but hateful answers, camaraderie, and a sense of power and

self-validation. As we have seen in the recent bombings of Jewish, Christian, and Moslem houses of worship, the end product of these groups is usually the death of innocent people..

We know how Jesus dealt with the divisions and violence of his time. He was not a Zealot or a partisan, and instead acted and spoke in truth and in love . He had divine power, but knew he had not been sent to be a worldly king. He came to be, in the words of our hymn today, “the King of Love,” the source of abundant and eternal life. His ministry was to guide his people like a shepherd to his and his Father’s alternative way of life, the way of love.

Jesus’ shepherding meant something besides leading his sheep into all the goodness and comfort expressed in the 23rd Psalm. The way of love that Jesus embodied meant more than a one-way pouring out of divine comfort and protection. It meant a relationship of mutuality, with bonds of love between sheep and shepherd. We heard it in our gospel today: The sheep and their true shepherd know each other. That knowing implies recognition of the shepherd’s voice and authenticity. It implies closeness, trust, and desire to follow. It also implies a bond so strong, and an attachment so permanent, that a sheep could never be lured or snatched away.

So how does knowing what Jesus did as a shepherd in the midst of the turmoil of his day help us understand how to approach the turmoil of today? The answer to this, though it seems way too simple, is to listen for opportunities to be good shepherds, helping others to know Jesus’ way of love. Here are some things we might do:

We can collaborate with our brother and sister sheep from diverse faiths and Christian denominations to extend love and hospitality to all of God’s sheep, especially to those on the margins, and we can stand strongly all together against the intrusions of hate into our world.

We can shepherd our children in the way of love. And we can offer love and community to the vulnerable youth who are lost and lonely, so that they will have strength and stability, and not be liable to engage in drugs or be snatched away by hate groups.

We can believe that each of us is a beloved sheep of God and can always seek God’s guidance, but we should also realize that at times when we may be lost sheep, we should trust others in the flock to shepherd us.

I close with these words from Christian philosopher Jean Vanier::

To become a good shepherd is to come out of the shell of selfishness in order to be attentive to those for whom we are responsible, so as to reveal to them their fundamental beauty and value and help them to grow and become fully alive.*

Thank you, loving God, for all good shepherds, and especially today for those who are mothers. Amen.

* Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*, New York: Paulist Press. 2004.