

Sermon Easter 4B, Sunday 4/25/2021

Readings at: https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB/RCL/Easter/BEaster4_RCL.html

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...We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another... **Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action... (1 John).**

The Lord is my shepherd...He revives my soul * **and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.** Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; * for you are with me... (Psalm 23).

...**if we are questioned today because of a good deed** done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, **let it be known to all of you,** and to all the people of Israel, **that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...** (Acts).

... "I am the good shepherd. **The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.** I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. (John).

I'll tell you the truth. I struggled with this week's sermon more than usual. I read the scriptures. I read the commentaries. But I just kept avoiding sitting down to write. I'm not 100% sure why that is, but I have a hunch. I think it's because in this week's readings, I can hear God calling us--calling ME-- towards a way of life that seems insurmountably distant from where I am.

I suppose that's ALWAYS the case whenever we're preaching the Gospel. The Gospel is always calling all of us--perhaps foremost the preacher--beyond the place where we are to new place--a more generous, spacious, just, true, loving and life-giving new place. But this week the chasm between where I am and where I sense God is calling me feels even **more** monumentally vast than usual.

This Tuesday afternoon I joined millions in breathing a collective sigh of relief upon hearing news of the conviction of former police officer Derek Chauvin in the murder of George Floyd.

I breathed a sigh of relief and a prayer of thanksgiving for this one baby step in the direction of justice for people of color in our country. But, as every community leader on the news that afternoon was quick to remind me, Tuesday's verdict was just that--one tiny baby step in a centuries long relay race towards the full realization of God's

Reign of Shalom-- God's kingdom of peace, and justice, and abundant life for ALL of God's children--including People of Color. We should give thanks for each baby step towards the Kingdom, but we should also remember that the finish line still is a LONG way off. It's not time for a medal. It's not time for a rest.

The problem for me is... I want to rest. I want to rest, even when I haven't really been running. Truth be told, I think I'm so tired but I don't even KNOW how to run!

Yet the words of today's scriptures make this abundantly clear:

*...We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ...**Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action...***

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action...

My friends, I wonder: What in our broken world breaks open your heart?

The illness of a loved one? The addiction of a friend?

The pollution of waters? The desecration of land?

The extinction of a species? The suffering of a neighbor?

A senseless mass shooting? A preventable death?

The loneliness of an elder? The fear of a child?

The exploitation of bodies? The destruction of dreams?

The nightmare of a mother reaching out, unable to rescue her beloved child from Death's Untimely Grasp?

The cancerous growth of myths **and** policies that seek to obscure the very humanity of dark-skinned people, native people, disabled people, queer people?

My friends, if these things break your heart, how much more must these things break the heart of our God? The God Jesus taught us to call our own Father? God, the Creator? The God who IS Love?

What then, shall we do?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action...

Truth and Action.

It may sound easy, but it isn't always--at least not for me. **Let us love, in truth and in action.** What truth? That's hard. What action? That's harder.

It's hard. It's confusing. It's scary. So, 9 times out of 10 when I hear this Call, I retreat to the comfort of my small, private, daily existence. I push the heartbreaking suffering of others to the outer edges of my awareness. I make excuses. I don't know the whole truth, so how can I know the right action to take? Rather than doing a possible wrong thing, isn't it better for me to do no-thing?

The problem is, as a member of the Body of Christ, as a follower of Jesus

I DO know the Truth.

Or at least I SHOULD know the Truth. And if I don't then perhaps I've stumbled upon my first action step.

Jesus says "I AM the Way and the Truth and the Life."

It's time I learn to KNOW the Truth more fully

It's time I learn to LOVE the Truth more deeply

It's time I learn to FOLLOW the Truth more bravely

As I comb through today's scripture readings, in search of any clue about HOW I can take MY next best step towards saying "yes" to God's call, MY next best step towards to say "yes" to loving more fully, in Truth and in Action...this is what I hear:

In today's readings I hear an invitation for me to start by drawing closer to Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

I hear an invitation to draw closer to Jesus so that I can better learn to recognize his voice, and better learn to heed that voice as he **"leads me along right pathways for his Name's sake"**. I may not always (or ever) know which is the "right" path, but I can trust that the Good Shepherd knows all the paths by heart, and that he is able to **lead me along right pathways** just as soon as I'm ready to follow.

In today's readings I also hear an invitation to draw nearer to Jesus, until I have grown so close to him that I can, with integrity and authority, act in his Name. Like the Apostles in our Reading from Acts -They gave away all their possessions and welcomed foreigners and healed the sick and ruffled feathers and got out of line and threatened the status quo and upset the authorities with their powerful actions of healing. Then when they are hauled before the authorities for healing a man they

explain with total calm and authority “**...if we are questioned today because of a good deed ... let it be known to all of you... that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.**”

In today’s readings I hear a further invitation to draw near to Jesus so that I can draw strength and courage from his presence, to sustain me in the face of evil and death, so that Evil’s long shadow does not discourage or overwhelm me. “**Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; * for you are with me...**”

In today’s readings I hear still another invitation to draw near to Jesus so that I can learn from him; So that in His Presence and by His Example--I can discover the power to lay down **my** life, in order to take it up again.

Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. **The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.** I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.” I need to learn what it means to lay down my life...and I need to claim the power and courage to do so ...to imitate Jesus in laying down my life in the service of Truth and the service of Love.

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action...

As we gather today, what do you feel--what is breaking your heart? What do you sense is breaking God’s heart?

As you search the Scriptures, as you search your Heart, as you search for a clue about HOW YOU can take YOUR next best step towards LOVING, in Truth and in Action...

I wonder: what invitations do YOU hear?