

April 21, 2013

Good Shepherd

So what is Religion about anyway? This past week, has been a bit of an interesting week for me. Again and again I have had encounters that have reminded me of this very important question. What first caught my attention was a quote at the bottom of an e-mail "**He who possesses art and science has religion; he who does not possess them, needs religion.**" Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

Amongst all of the anti-religion quotes that have become so popular these days, I must admit I kind of liked this one. At least it seemed to indicate that religion might be a quest for truth and beauty. Even if it implies that once we move into art and science we can leave the immaturity of religion behind. This was far more pleasant than a comment by one of my inter-faith colleagues who decided to take a shot at us and whether we were really interested in what was true. He asked, in front of his congregation if our national magazine would ever publish an article that would raise questions about the historical accuracy of some of the core basis of our faith, like the empty tomb. What really bugged me about this was that he was right. We wouldn't. We mainly tell nice stories, and largely avoid any sort of hard nose quest for the truth, or meaningful public debate, at least in the Canada Lutheran.

You see I think that both those who are a part of and those who lead faith communities, myself included, are some of the ones who most often forget what religion is about. Whether I am reading about some of the need for reform at the Vatican and realizing how our church struggles with similar problems; or when I hear from non-church friends about their perception of church as an inward focused, irrelevant and judgmental club and then I see those very traits in what would be my first knee jerk interpretation of today's texts. An interpretation that basically says that Jesus calls us sheep, because sheep are dumb or that this passages is about recognizing that those who aren't with us, simply are not Jesus' sheep and thus can be condemned. When I step back and look at this, I can almost hear the chorus from the Messiah, that goes like this "Oh we like sheep, have gone astray"

So what is religion about? Specifically, what is Christianity and this good news of Easter about? So far this Easter we have had stories that have showed us how we encounter Jesus through our doubt and questions, we then saw how Jesus calls us back from our tendency to revert to old patterns. Now we need a bit of a vision of what we are being called to, which is why we have this Sunday as the Sunday of the good shepherd.

Now the interpretation that this is just about how dumb or sinful sheep has the problem, it forgets that scripture is written as an echo chamber. This is why it is so important to read and study the whole of scripture so that we can hear what is being echoed. Today we are lucky because one of the things that is echoed when Jesus uses this imagery of the good shepherd, is one of the most beloved of all the psalms; Psalm 23. It is a psalm about God, what God does for us, and how God relates to us. **“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake”**. This is not about a God who thinks sheep are just dumb, rather it is about a God who leads God’s sheep to abundance and goodness, restoring their souls, leading them down paths that are both good and that lead to these green pastures. This is imagery that reminds us that our faith is about being led into abundance, having the core of our being restored and our way of life made good.

This is also not soft wish washy imagery. There is the clear acknowledgement of evil. We live in a world where things like the explosions in Boston happen, and we live through them. And Religion does not spare us from these things. Rather, as Psalm 23 states **“even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff- they comfort me”**. The image of God as a Sheppard is not about a God who condemns us or abandons us in our darkness, rather God is with us, even in the darkest valley, even when explosions kill children. God remains with us.

And I love the last line. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” Goodness, this is what our faith is about, and not goodness in some self-righteous sense, rather goodness, that is paired with mercy; a word that is also translated as loving kindness. There is a good reason why that quote from the e-mail I read related religion and art – for art is

about expressing and discovering beauty, even in the midst of the struggle and ugliness of the world. For me I can imagine nothing more beautiful than loving kindness, which is present in the midst of the darkest valley.

So if this is what Christianity is about then how do we get there? This is where the Gospel of John helps us. How does this shepherd work? In John this journey begins not with what we do, or what we believe, but rather with who we are. **“My sheep hear my voice.”** Now this can cause great anxiety. Am I one of God’s sheep? All I can say is relax, if you are drawn to faith, if you have a restlessness that seeks out God, or wonders about God, and above all if you have been baptized, you are one of God’s sheep. For by these waters, you were made God’s sheep and if somewhere in your heart there is a desire for God, you are God’s.

The next part, “My sheep hear my voice, and they follow me”. When we were planning our worship services, I starting going on the dumb sheep tangent, and how they don’t seem to follow a person’s voice, all based on my very limited experience with sheep. Then Brenda told me about her sister who raises sheep, how the sheep actually do follow her voice and come to her and how they don’t come to her husband or follow him. So why do sheep scatter from me and her husband; well it is because we don’t spend time with the sheep, while Brenda’s sister is the one who feeds them, who cares for them. Sheep get to know the voice of the shepherd, because they spend time with the shepherd and are fed by him or her. The same thing is for Jesus.

Contrary to much misinformation, Christianity is not primary about doctrine, or rules, but rather at its core it is about a relationship with God. We come to know Jesus thought that relationship, we come to know Jesus’ voice as we spend time studying scripture, as we spend time in prayer, and in worship. And it is not just about time, you can show up here and get nothing out of it and you can be absolutely bored with it, unless you put in the effort of listening, and opening yourself up to hear God’s voice. Worship is not about how well we entertain you, it is about how you intentionally come and listen for the voice of the shepherd in all of this, for it is here and it’s just up to you to listen.

And it is also not just about listening; it is also about following Jesus' voice. This is the tough part. There is no separation between what is religious and the rest of life, between the sacred and the secular. Rather, what is holy: times of prayer, scripture and worship are intended to flow into our life. As psalm 23 says, "**He leads me in right paths**", and "**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me *all the days of my life***"

When I studied social work they always talked about the cycle between action and reflection, but as the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez points out in Christianity it is rather a flow between prayer and action, between listening for God's voice and following. For it is in this back and forth that we learn to really hear and discern God's voice, how to follow the ways of God and by this come to know God. And it is from this that we are led to the green pastures and our soul is resorted. This is also where we will find truth, religious truth. It is though quite a different truth than what science can provide. Science can teach us wonderful things about our world, the so called objective truth. That sort of truth is interesting to religion, but it is not the core of what we seek. What religion seeks is truth that is found in our relationship, first with God and secondly with all of creation. Living into these right relationships, which is what we mean by words like, Justice, Righteousness, Peace and Goodness.

Now can this get messy? Oh yes, life is messy, we all easily get lost. Which is probably why Jesus stresses **that, no one will snatch them from me**. Once we are Jesus' sheep, no matter how messy life gets, no matter how lost we might get God doesn't let us get ultimately lost. The gift of eternal life is yours, never to be lost. So how Does God find us, and keep us from being eternally snatched? Well there is the end of time solution, when Christ will gather all into God, but until then God works though us.

Brenda shared me another story about her sister the shepherd. "Kathie had a remarkable experience one day when she was going out to a field. On one particular day, she decided to take a totally different path through the jack pines. She doesn't know why, she just did. On the path, she soon came across a baby lamb one or two days old in the bush all by itself and far away from the other sheep. She got off her quad, got down on her knees, and encouraged this little baby lamb to come to her and it walked right into her waiting arms. She embraced the little lamb and took it back to the sheep fold. She

named the baby lamb Jesus. It reminded her that Jesus was the one who led her to take this totally different path that day. “How does God gather us back? Well it is by people like you, and like Kathie, who actually listen to something that moves us to follow a different path, with eyes open enough to see the lost lambs, and with patience and loving kindness, to get off our busyness to pick up those who are lost and bring them back home.

So what is religion about? It is about the truth that is found in our relationship with the good shepherd who leads us to green pastures. It about the beauty of that comes when we learn to follow God’s ways bringing goodness and loving kindness even to the darkest valley. Above all it is about the shepherd, who calls our name, who is one with the Father and who by his, birth, death and resurrection made the Father one with all things.

There was one other thing that made me ask what religion is truly about. There are many things about the attack in Boston that struck me, but one thing has stood out more than anything else was something pointed out to me by one of my friends. After the bombs when off, there were all these people running, not away from the explosions, but rather towards them. They were running to see if anyone needed help. Risking their own lives to save others. It seems to me, a pretty profound and contemporary image of what both God and religion are truly about.

Amen