

Easter IV Year B

“I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again.”

Well we're in the midst of Easter which means we're in the midst of reading from the Gospel of John....so for the last several weeks I have endeavored to provide us with a framework by which we can make some common sense out of this very uncommon gospel, so you're going to be Johannine scholars after we head into the season after Pentecost....We learn in the prologue of course what this gospel is about....It is about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth....whom John describes using the Greek philosophical term Logos, or Word, which as multiple meanings....Word meaning the connection point between God and human kind... Word meaning divine truth and light...for the Greeks that would mean enlightenment, which would mean some measure of mystical unity between the human and divine...but John goes further...he says that the Word and God are the same, Jesus and God one and the same....the Word, not merely go-between, but the Word become human and living and moving in history....and that not only is the Word all about divine light (enlightenment) and truth, but it is also one and the same as the light and truth of humankind....that theology and anthropology become one knowledge...the knowledge of one is the same as knowing the other....that's stunning language in the early second century... and I daresay stunning to us who hear it in the 21st century....And I would say further that it is an awareness from which we as the faithful have retreated over the course of Christianity's history..... this gospel was interpreted and reinterpreted by the likes of Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Barth, and many others, all of whom believed strongly in the unworthiness and inadequacy of the human community....It was brought to our shores by the Romans, Anglicans, and Puritans alike...this self loathing of our humanity quite ironically in the face of being told in scripture, that we are made in God's very image.

This gospel fleshes out, as it were, what the godlike human community looks like....The writer uses metaphor after metaphor...John the consummate poet imploring us to seek and discover the identity of Christ and therefore our own identity using our imaginations....The so-called I am passages cases in point...You recall God referred to himself to Moses as I am....so here Jesus the God man using the exact language that wouldn't be lost on his biblically literate audience.

The metaphor for today is the one I have the most trouble with...the Good shepherd....shepherding a well known part of the day to day order of

Jesus' age...Jesus seeking to equate God's presence in the mundane...to look for God's presence not high in the heavens but in the common things of earth...but this metaphor is a little lost on me...I know about lamb chops, lamb shanks and rack of lamb...but that's about as far as it goes with me...I don't know about sheep-herding...the other metaphors: gate, door, bread and wine, transformed mundane ingredients into rich and pleasurable nurture, even the metaphor of the vineyard I can appreciate being acquainted with gardening...but this one about the good shepherd is harder at least for me, though it has been the subject of art and music and poetry, and stained glass windows over the centuries...so let's pay attention to what is operative in this mundane example of who this god man is, and therefore who we are....The operative phrase which evokes the energy in this passage is the phrase "laying down one's life"...the shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep... This the operative theme throughout John's gospel, that the Christ wholeheartedly lives for the other, for the good of the whole...interest in the good and not interest in the self only...the hireling in this passage is a symbol of self interest. Laying down one's life is to live utterly for the other no matter what the cost; the washing of feet another metaphor.

So let me say it again...when we hear the words I am...those words also, and no less mean:... we are...I am the good shepherd I lay down my life for the sheep...we are the good shepherd, we lay down our lives for the sheep...I alluded to the Augustinian, and Calvinist tradition earlier...and indeed I think most of us have been taught that Jesus is the good shepherd who takes care of us not very agile, not very intelligent, prone to wander sheep (believe it or not some theologian in the mid twentieth century did all this study on the intelligence or lack thereof in sheep...kept him off the streets I suppose)....We've been taught that we are wandering sinners in dire need of some expert herding...that lamb being carried on the shoulders of the manly Jesus in our modern culture is me.

But that interpretation doesn't square with John's theology...For John, recognizing Jesus and therefore recognizing God among us...is to recognize ourselves for who we truly are...to know Jesus and the way of Jesus, the way through the door, is to know ourselves and the way we must go...the voice of the shepherd that the sheep know, is the voice, the heart, the conscience calling us into the vocation of shepherd, calling us to lay down our lives for the lost of our world; we the shoulders for the lost and the weak... until all become one flock, the metaphor continues, until all become one community who hear the voice that not only calls us into vocation, but that also empowers us, encourages us, gives us whole hearts and the knowledge that all manner of thing is being made well.

I am vine....we are vine providing life sustaining nurture to the human community that is in truth one vibrant organism....I am door....we are the open door of welcome and hospitality inviting all who would come and find nurture and dignity and rest....I am bread and I am wine....We are bread and we are wine to be blessed broken and given to the world as food for the world's redemption....we could create our own modern day metaphors...I am nurse....I am social worker...I am teacher....I am advocate...there are others...endless manifestations of God in us....I am in the Father and the father is in me, Jesus says....We are in the Father and the father is in us....I believe the sooner we recognize how short life is and how vital and urgent our call to be engaged with the wounds of our world is....the sooner that we know that our lives exist only to give them away.... The sooner the better we know that salvation is not ours to keep but that salvation is ours to give away....which is what laying down one's life means...Laying down one's life is the rudimentary means of salvation, the essence of God's life among us....God cannot save without our hands in vocation, laying down our lives; and we are told that we are empowered to take up that life again and again, just to lay it down again and again for the world's transformation and renewal and restoration....the sooner we recognize that voice that calls, that voice so deeply familiar....then the sooner we begin taking sheep herding lessons...and the sooner the better.