

Easter 4, Yr C
April 25, 2010

*How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.
-John 10:24 b*

Some Jews came to ask Jesus to tell them whether he was the Messiah or not. "Tell us plainly," they said.

And so Jesus started to tell them about sheep. Pretty plain for those folks back in the day, but for us...not so much. We don't herd sheep. We don't see sheep unless we go to a petting zoo. Of course, we have heard a lot about sheep at church, particularly on this 4th Sunday of Easter when, every year, the gospel lesson contains one of the many sayings about Jesus as the good shepherd and about us as the sheep. But it is still not such an easy example to understand for us in the 21st century.

We all want to be told plainly. Give us a list. Yes or no. Make it quick and to the point. Cut and dried. I tried to think of a plain, simple image that would do for the 21st century, but I was unsuccessful. The closest I got was a playground full of small children and a daycare worker or a babysitter, but it didn't really translate so well. But I think the bottom line, speaking plainly, is one we can all understand. Sheep need to be taken care of. They are in danger of becoming lost or even being snatched up by those who would harm them unless their shepherd protects them. The shepherd cares for them, loves them, finds them when they are lost, protects them and would even die for them.

We also need to be taken care of. We also are in danger of becoming lost or being snatched up by those who would harm us. But we are protected by our shepherd, Jesus, who loves us and cares for us, who finds us when we are lost, protects us from harm, and who even dies for us.

Jesus said to those who were asking him in the temple if he were the Messiah, "The Father and I are one." Simply speaking, Jesus was telling them that if they wanted to know what God was doing in the world, they could look at Jesus; if they wanted to know how God treats outcasts and sinners, then look at how they are treated by Jesus. God and Jesus are the same.

It's not so easy in 2010 to know what God is doing in the world. There are many

voices calling to us, asking us to listen to them; not all of them are worth listening to, and we don't have the physical body of Jesus here with us to identify the voice as easily. But at our creation, we were given the gift of reason - reason, which helps us discern between the voices in order to find the right one. And scripture tells us who Jesus was and is, and how he treated the people around him. And if we are unsure, we can always ask ourselves 'what would Jesus do'.

We know that God loves us; we are God's creation and God calls us good. We are loved, treated justly, healed and transformed into the people we are called to be. And we, in turn, are called to be the ones now who love others, who treat others justly, who heal others, who protect others from those who would snatch them up and who transform others into the people they are called to be. We have been transformed from sheep into shepherds and our job is to care for other sheep, transforming them, and on and on, until the whole world is transformed and the reign of God is fully realized.

How do we accomplish these things? There are lots of ways, of course. But here are some examples:

Last Thursday, Jim and I officiated at a funeral service for one of the core members of L'Arche. The service was held in the chapel, which was packed with core members, assistants, office staff, even board members and other friends. At one point during the service, there was an opportunity for anyone who wanted to say something about Liz to do so. A few of her caregivers talked about her, some of her peers talked about her, and finally, one man talked about how he had just come to work at L'Arche when Liz befriended him and became someone who transformed him and his way of looking at the world because of who she was. That transformation has stuck with him and he tries to pass it on to others.

This weekend was Food Share. During the week, the food to be given out was selected and ordered from the food bank. It arrived on Thursday, right at the time of the funeral, and one person helped the new driver unload the pallets of food from the truck. On Friday night, a handful of people packed the food into grocery bags and arranged tables in Stirling Hall to be ready for the next day. On Saturday, a few men show up very early to start welcoming the folks who come to get food and giving each of them a ticket. Around 8:00, six of us start to sign the people in. Others collect the tickets and hand out the food. Some help carry the groceries out for those who are unable. My job is signing people in. There are

always people in my line who never fail to make me feel good. They greet me as if we are long-lost friends, and thank me; some even bless me as they leave my table. They transform me.

And last night I went to a celebration / fundraiser dinner for Family Promise - Interfaith Hospitality Network. The tables were full of volunteers from all the churches that participate in housing homeless families during the year. Treating these families with dignity, helping them heal, loving and caring for them are the gifts these volunteers give as they welcome, feed, clothe and visit. Transformation.

One speaker said that you know you are a servant by the way that you feel when you are asked to serve. That is transformation, too.

In case anyone needs more 'plain' examples, maybe when you're feeling as if you need help finding a way to serve, you can always turn to pages 304 and 305 in the prayer book. These are the vows that we make in our Baptismal Covenant:

- continue in teaching and fellowship, in breaking bread, and in prayers
- resist evil, repent and return to God
- proclaim the Good News by word and example
- seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving neighbor as self
- strive for justice and peace, respect the dignity of every one

This is how the world is transformed. It's as plain as the nose on my face. Amen.