

SPG#167, EASTER 4A

April 13, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 2:42-47

1 Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

This day, April 13, the 4th Sunday of Easter, was the day that Gene Bateman would have delivered a sermon to us. He planned to preach on the 23rd Psalm, which is our Psalm today. And so I dedicate this sermon to Gene Bateman in celebration of his communion in the saints and in celebration of our memories of him. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have drawn today's sermon from a sermon I delivered here three years ago. And somehow when I thought of Gene, it seemed to fit the occasion.

Many times in the Scripture we are called upon to assume an active role in regard to Jesus Christ. We are called upon to believe that his coming was foretold hundreds of years before he came. We are called upon to believe that he was born of a virgin.

We are called upon to believe that he could restore sight to a man born blind. We are called upon to believe that he could change water into wine. That he could appear with Moses and Elijah in blinding light. We are called upon to remain steadfast in our faith in him. We are called upon to follow him. In the gospel of John we are called upon to think about him, about who he is and what his presence means. "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us."

We are called upon to grasp the incomprehensible, that God has become a human.

In the New Testament he speaks to us in parables and figures and challenges us to search for hidden meanings. The parable of the seeds and the different types of soil. Jesus asks us at points to consider and reconsider the cost of following him as Lord.

Over the centuries since his physical life on earth many scholars have constructed theologies based on their experience of him. Many archaeologists have tried to unearth the real truth about his life in Palestine, where he may have lived, what he looked like.

In our own lives we are called upon to be aware in life of his coming, in everyday life, in persons, conversations.

We are called upon to accept and comprehend the meaning of the crucifixion. We are called upon to accept and comprehend the meaning of the resurrection.

But today, in the gospel, his tone is different. He uses the analogy of a sheepfold, or a shelter for sheep. He speaks of himself as the Shepherd of the sheep. He speaks of familiarity. He says that he calls his sheep by name and leads them out. And the sheep follow him because they know his voice. If there is any doubt, Jesus is the Shepherd, and we are the sheep. But beyond that simple analogy there is no theology to figure out.

There is only Jesus the Shepherd who cares for us his sheep. And because we have known him over time, known him in the stories of his life, known him in the lives of others, known him in the breaking of the bread, we are familiar with him. We know the sound of his voice.

It almost seems too simple, that we in lives that are filled with figuring and accomplishing and achieving should simply encounter Jesus in his love for us.

And yet, in the life of faith, hopefully there is room for that simplicity.

There are many passages of scripture where the apostle Paul challenges us toward a new spiritual level. And there are scriptures that encourage us to persevere. But there are scriptures that I call comfortable scriptures that just speak to this simple faith.

For example, when Jesus said to his disciples and to us, "I have called you friends."

And when he said, "I am with you always, even at the end."

Or when he prayed to this Father referring to us, "I have loved them as you loved me."

For years Charles Schultz in his comic strip "Peanuts," utilized simple religious truths in the characters of Charlie Brown, Lucy, and others. In one of these Charlie Brown is sitting near Lucy who is in her "Psychiatric Help 5 cents" booth. Charlie Brown says,

"Sometimes I think I don't know anything about life...I need help...Tell me a great truth!

Tell me something about living that will help me." Lucy asks...."Do you ever wake up at night and want a drink of water?" "Sure," says Charlie Brown, quite often.

Lucy continues, "When you are getting a drink of water in the dark, always rinse out the glass because there might be a bug in it...Five cents please."

In the last panel Charlie Brown says to himself, "Great truths are even more simple than I thought they were."

Is it possible that we make faith more complicated than it really is? Is it possible to live a day or days where we simply acknowledge God's love for us and ours for Him in return?

Is it possible to be reminded of this love when we see the first robin of spring, when we see tulips bursting out of their buds, when we see a sunrise or a sunset?

Is it possible to be reminded of this love when we appreciate again the gift of a particular friend, or the gift of a spouse? I would say yes. And if we all said yes, then we would be aware of the still small voice of God who calls us to live in the enjoyment and fulfillment of love.

In our lives there is always time to work, to plan, to anticipate, to adjust, and to change.

But in our lives is there time to just love and be loved?

Within the last two weeks the Dill family has told me of an encounter with a second grade boy in their home associated with the youth group. The subject of the day was the resurrection. But the little boy, in all sincerity, insisted that Jesus was dead.

But Gailanne said, “Well honey, he really did rise from the dead.” The little boy said with disgust, “No one ever tells me anything.”

In a short story written by Robert Horine entitled “The Gospel According to Badger,” he tells the story of a three year old boy named Badger who for some reason was named after the family cat. Badger is the son of Deborah and John. They are good parents, loving Christian people. Badger and his family attend church regularly. Badger attends the Sunday School for his age group. He seems to have a real appreciation for the images of Jesus’ birth, the manger, Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds and the wise men. When he was in the car at Christmas time with his parents, whenever he would see a manger scene in a yard he would say, “Jesus.” But the most amazing thing happened one night when Badger and his parents had gone to a church sponsored Bible Study on the book of Hebrews. Abruptly, and not in relation to anything that was going on, Badger said,

“Jesus love me.” And then he went on to softly say, “Jesus love you,” as he pointed to each person in the group. Finally he ended up by saying over and over, “We love Jesus.”

I think it would be easy to characterize Badger’s story as a simple, childlike, heart warming tale, appropriate for children his age, but not particularly applicable to adults. But the author says that Badger was in touch with the profound love of Christ that applies to all humans. I recall those days when I was Badger’s age. I recall seeing the pictures of the life of Jesus. I remember singing the song, “Jesus Loves Me.”

I think on a day that might not be one of my best days that I would be grateful for those experiences that occurred when I was a child. I would be grateful because that childlike faith formed the basis of a more mature faith that I have as an adult.

But I think on a day that might be one of my best that I would realize that that childlike faith is still part of me. And that even though I am an adult of almost 61 years, childlike faith is something to be celebrated as part of my present life. Then I would be able to more hear the love of God in the song of a bird. I would be able to see the love of God in a tree blowing in the Iowa wind. I would be able to smell the love of God in the fragrance of a flower.

If on a day we are able to appreciate, to celebrate, to cherish our childlike faith, then the voice of the Good Shepherd will be very familiar to us. And we will follow him because we know his voice. And on that day pretense will fall away. And we will all know that before God we are all children.

In this world where we hear the call of God to negotiate life in an unjust world, to be mature and achieving, grown up and sophisticated, may we also hear his call in the familiar voice of the Good Shepherd.

May the heart of a child be celebrated. May love be simple.

Jesus love me. Jesus love you. We love Jesus. Amen.