

The 4th Sunday of Easter is nicknamed, "Good Shepherd Sunday." We have readings every year about Jesus as our Shepherd. But today, I want a break. So with your indulgence, I'm not going to say anything more about shepherds today. We'll save them for another year. Instead, I want to focus in on our Epistle reading which doesn't even mention the word, "Shepherd."

Our Epistle begins with a wonderful verse, 1John 3:16. Not quite as famous as John 3:16. Just about everyone knows about John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

But 1John 3:16 dovetails nicely with John 3:16. 1John 3:16 says, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

Jesus gave himself for us. We ought to give ourselves for one another. A nice sentiment. It dovetails with what we hear elsewhere in the Gospel of John.

After all, at the Last Supper in John 15, Jesus gave the new commandment to "Love one another, as I have loved you." It's a nice, friendly, warm-fuzzy idea. Jesus loved us. He calls us to love one another. Jesus gave himself for us. We should give of ourselves.

But wait a minute. John and Jesus are not just talking about just casual giving of ourselves. John and Jesus are talking about real sacrifice. Look at v16 again. Jesus laid down his life. He gave himself totally. So we ought to lay down our lives. We ought to give of ourselves, totally. We're not talking about casual giving. We're talking about heavy-duty, sacrificial giving.

And if that's not tough enough, we hear v17. And I tell you, it's very hard for us as 21st century Americans to hear v17: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" Youch. That's tough stuff.

I think John intends it to be tough stuff. Because I think John is trying to correct a misreading of his Gospel. John's Gospel is all about the importance of belief--believing in Jesus Christ, following him. And yet it's so easy to get caught up in the importance of believing in Jesus that we forget to do what Jesus calls us to do. It's not just about belief. It's also about action. And it's all too easy to land on one side, and forget about the other.

In our polarized country, we often see this playing out. We have more conservative Christians who are focused on salvation. "Are you saved? Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior?" Well, these are important questions. Belief in Jesus Christ is central for Christians. Going out and evangelizing, proclaiming his good news is important. But for these Christians it's often all too easy to downplay or even forget that Jesus calls us to serve, to minister to the poor and the weak. It's not just about belief. It's about believing and serving.

Of course the opposite is true as well. We have Christians who labor very hard for social justice. I know liberal Christians who are passionate about the serving the poor, the persecuted. They are ready at the drop of a hat to march or to sign a petition or to work on

behalf of the suffering. But for these Christians it becomes all too easy to make Jesus an afterthought, or to downplay him, or to even ignore him all together.

They sometimes seem to be serving the poor from purely humanistic motives, because it seems to be a good thing to do, not because in serving the poor they are serving Christ himself. They mustn't forget, it's not just about serving. It's about believing in Jesus Christ as the unique and only savior of the world as well.

That's what John is telling us. Belief in Jesus Christ is of vital importance. But because we believe in Jesus Christ, we are called, we are commanded to do what he did. v17 again. "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" How can you claim to believe in Jesus and yet turn your back on the suffering in the world around you? John's answer is, 'You can't. You need to do both.' And if there's any question of that, look at v23: "This is (God's) commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us."

Belief and love. It's not either/or. It's both/and. Believe in Jesus. Love one another. And the difficult place where the rubber meets the road is trying to do both of those things in our culture.

Our culture tells us choose up sides--either you're conservative or liberal. In the polarized church, it's either about belief in Jesus Christ as the unique son of God, or it's about social justice. Pick one side or the other. But my hope is that all of us in this congregation feel challenged by all of the Gospel.

That means that I hope that those of you who are more conservative are stretched and pushed at times by the very clear Gospel mandates to care for the poor and the weak. That means that I hope that those of you who are more liberal are stretched and pulled at times by the very clear Gospel message that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the one and only redeemer of the world. That means that I hope that those of you somewhere in the middle are also challenged by those aspects of the Gospel that you'd like to ignore or forget. If you're too comfortable with the message of the gospel, then you're probably not paying attention to all of the gospel.

My hope, my vision for us as a congregation is that we continue to be a safe space where people can come to resist the polarization around us. A place where we can say together, "It's not either/or. It's both/and."

Jesus Christ is central to our lives as Christians. That means that Jesus Christ has to be our anchor and our focal point. That means that we don't retreat one iota from standing up and saying the same thing that Peter said in our lesson from Acts today: "(Jesus Christ is) the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." Being centered and rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ is vital.

But that's not enough. And it's not enough because Jesus tells us it's not enough. Yes, believe in Jesus. But also, love others in his name. Serve the poor, the needy, the

downtrodden, the struggling, the lonely. That may mean struggle. That may mean sacrifice. That may mean pushing the envelope of what's comfortable. But it's what God has called us to do.

Our culture may want us to choose up sides: Are you going to move right and focus on believing in Jesus? Or are you going to move left and focus on serving others in his name? Let us be clear. God is calling us to do both. Those are two of the three parts of our mission statement:

Worshipping God in the beauty of holiness.

AND

Serving our neighbors in Jesus name.

May God give us the courage to embrace that call. May God give us his power and grace so that we can carry it out his work.