

Sermon
Easter 4-B
April 25, 2021
St. Andrew's, Methuen
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Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

You and I live off our mental images. We learn them young and they determine how we make sense of our world. So, it is a necessary spiritual discipline to examine our images in order that we can update some and outgrow others.

Jesus got himself killed by challenging the prevailing images of his world—the image that the Temple and its sacrifice are the center of the universe; the image that Samaritans and prostitutes are as loved by God as the High Priest and the faithful Pharisee.

Today Jesus challenges our images of what it means to be religious.

Growing up in the South being religious meant belonging to a church that helped you “walk the straight and narrow.” One of my neighbors belonged to a church that taught him that really religious people don’t drink, smoke, dance, or go to movies. And they also know that those who do such things would not make it to heaven at the end of life.

The image I grew up with at my Episcopal parish in northwest Atlanta, was being religious meant you belonged to a church that was like a large field where you could safely run, jump, and play with folks like you. We were all part of one large extended happy family.

Sure, there are fences surrounding the field, but as long as you don’t jump the fence by stealing from your company or having an affair, you would be just fine.

I like this image and have offered it countless times to folks who were stuck with the straight and narrow image and herniating themselves over how to be perfect and to believe every line of the creed.

This large field image invites people to go to church, pay their pledge, and don’t be rude at coffee hour. This image helps you care about the people in the field with you.

When folks were asked what they loved about the church they said things like, "oh, we love the people, we love the fellowship, we have amazing suppers."

They were describing the good life in that big field. There is absolutely nothing wrong with what they said, but there was something missing:

God was missing; any need for God or desire to grow deeper into God was missing. We rarely talked about God with each other. Conversation at coffee hour was not about struggles in the spiritual life but about sports, movies, (the Oscars are tonight!) and how the kids were doing. All good stuff! But didn't come up.

And Jesus was never mentioned except at the end of prayers where we'd say, "through Jesus Christ our Lord". We would feel intense embarrassment if some outsider wandered in and asked us about our relationship with Jesus. Ditto the Holy Spirit. If pushed we'd say God was the rancher who'd come out every so often to check on us, but mainly God would leave us to ourselves.

We were doing the best we could, but the image of church as a large fenced in field, though an improvement over "the straight and narrow", **might not be the only image we need.**

 Jesus gives us another image today for us to contemplate. He says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me..."

Notice in this image that **there are no fences, but only the big wide world.**

And in that world, there is a significant problem: It's dangerous out there. There are no fences to keep out the bad people and things that can harm us.

In this image the shepherd is absolutely essential and thriving.

According to the 23rd Psalm without the shepherd we will not find the green pastures or the still water and our souls will not be revived. Without the shepherd we won't find the right pathways, and we won't stand a chance against the wolves without the shepherd's rod and staff to protect us.

The flock is our family, yes, but if we follow the flock and forget the shepherd we will not make it.

This image can be profoundly comforting if we let it sink deeply enough into our souls where it can be an operative principle more than just a pious sentiment. It invites us to put God at the center of our lives and to question the ego's belief that money, healthcare, and entertainment are all we need to be happy.

I've mentioned before a parishioner in North Carolina who went into a serious tailspin after the death of his wife of 60 years. Yet, 6 months later he was back to his chipper self and when I asked what had happened he said: Well, I took the medicine the doctor prescribed, but what really did it was I started praying the 23rd psalm several times every day, deeply praying that God was in fact my shepherd so I could trust God to lead me the rest of the way home.

But in addition to the **comfort** of this image of God as my shepherd, there is also **the discomfort** in this image. The **Good Shepherd doesn't just attend to our needs, he also calls us to follow him in attending to the needs of others.**

Follow Jesus, where?

Guiding us on "right pathways" which the New Jerusalem Bible translates "pathways of saving justice." That is to stand with those, like George Floyd, who have the oppressor kneeling on their necks not just for 9 minutes but for 400 years.

Jesus leads us through the Valley of the Shadow, and not around it.

Jesus leads us to dinner with those who trouble us, instead of allowing us to stay in our green pastures with only those who think, feel, and vote like us.

Far too often churches use fences not just to keep familiar people in but also to keep strange people out. In the Realm of God there are no fences.

In his book The End of Religion Bruxy Cavey says, "**Jesus died not just to get us into heaven when we die, but to get heaven into us while we live.**" The End of Religion, page 198

Let's meditate deeply on Jesus as our Good Shepherd. If he isn't leading us into both **comfort and discomfort**, we aren't paying attention to everything he says in the Gospels and in our own souls:

"I am the good shepherd...I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Final Blessing

MAY GOD BLESS YOU with discomfort,
at easy answers, half-truths,
and superficial relationships
so that you may live
deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
at injustice, oppression,
and exploitation of people,
so that you may work for
justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears,
to shed for those who suffer pain,
rejection, hunger, and war,
so that you may reach out your hand
to comfort them and
to turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you
with enough foolishness
to believe that you can
make a difference in the world,
so that you can do
what others claim cannot be done,
to bring justice and kindness
to all our children and the poor. Amen

Edited from [A Franciscan Prayer "May God Bless You with Discomfort"](#) (paulistcenter.org)