

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Easter III

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

To understand the human desire to want to choose is to acknowledge that choices are not simply made out of a vacuum. Our experience, histories, personal stories, and desires-some of which may be inordinate, our character formation and ultimately our regard for ourselves and those we care about all converge, at some point-some way, somehow, and aid us in making that one choice over another.

The fact of the matter is no child is born a bad or truant child-The Doctrine of Original Sin, which was first alluded to by Irenaeus but developed by St. Augustine would have us believe that the scourge of human sin passes on from a parent to a child. For this very reason, humans are predisposed to sin and are sinful. But this theory doesn't tell us how good we are, how good we can be or that we are predisposed to goodness.

After all, if we believe that creation is an ongoing process, and that God is still engaged in the business of creating, then as the writer of Genesis wrote, that "God looked at everything that He had created and it was good." God still looks at everything that God creates and it is good-creation is good. The little one-Liam, who will baptize today is good, his parents are good, his sibling is good, his godparents are good, his grandparents are good and those of us who are witnesses to this baptism both within and beyond these walls are also good. We are all born good, and we are predisposed to the goodness of the shepherd.

Bear in mind that that which distinguishes the two shepherds isn't predicated on the nature and manner of birth, nor is the hired shepherd incapable of being a good shepherd-both the good and the hired shepherd are capable of being good, both the good and the hired shepherd have choices but the motivation underlying their choices is that which sets the two apart.

In telling this story, Jesus doesn't appeal to any superior quality or instinct which he may or may not have or which may be inaccessible to the hired shepherd. For, to use a superior quality will not only make the task of being like the good shepherd inaccessible to those who may not possess that same quality, but that characterization alone inevitably creates a barrier which the hired shepherd may have to overcome in an attempt to make choices similar to that of the good shepherd.

If Christ is offering us an example of what it takes to be a good shepherd, that example has to be as humanly possible as it can be-that example has to be within our reach. Any example beyond human capability only renders that example ineffective and unworkable because that example will have to require us to be something other than being simply human to actually make the example meaningful.

I have met a lot of people in my young life, but I have not met anyone who did not like the idea of having options from which to make a choice. As human as we are, we crave for options, we like to know that there are other available possibilities. Our very freedom or the lack thereof often depends on our ability to make choices. The fact that we have options from which to make a choice eases human limitations in a meaningful way. However, there are times when we really don't have any alternative but just that one single choice with which to contend.

But that is not the situation Jesus describes with the shepherd story, he like the hired shepherd also had a choice-to lay down his life as an offering for the sheep or to cower in the face of the approaching band of wolfs sent by the chief priest and run away.

The very same people who orchestrated Jesus' crucifixion are the same people that had Peter and John arrested, and like they did to Jesus, brought them before a group of elders for questioning. Peter's answer was as much an indictment on the elders as it was a proclamation of victory of Jesus over the wolves from whom he did not run away.

Peter did not attribute the healing of the man or the good deed extended to the once crippled man to himself, he rather pointed to the man Jesus who was crucified but had been raised from the dead as the reason, the basis upon which the crippled man is now healed. Peter seems to be telling the elders that if they thought they were getting rid of a nuisance, their actions have been counterproductive because the crucified one has now become the reason upon which goodness is extended and shared, and has become the foundation upon which all will be saved.

If one thing was clear to Peter and to John, it was that he was an agent, a messenger filled with the spirit to perpetuate the goodness of the crucified innocent. If the disciples before the crucifixion and the resurrection could not offer healing to the sick, the crippled, the maimed, the lepers, the blind, the deaf, the dumb and all those who desired some healing of sorts, now, by virtue of the resurrection of Jesus, they can respond appropriately to the human condition, and also proclaim the message of salvation without any ounce of fear of the wolf. One gratification that became so apparent after the resurrection of Jesus was that they could emulate the rabbi by choosing to even lay down their own lives for the sheep.

So then no matter how raging and ferocious the wolf might appear to be, no matter the terrifying depth of the valley of death—a valley characterized by incessant persecution and brute terror, they had no cause or reason to be afraid because the resurrection had provided them with an example of what it takes to lay down a life for another even in the face of death. An example grounded in love.

John echoes a similar sentiment with a question bothering on the essence of a love that recognizes a need but refuses to help. John doesn't dismiss the fact that we have to make a choice to respond either way, he questions why would make a choice not to help. In John's estimation, we cannot profess love and yet reject the demands of love.

Love compels us to give, love requires that even though we are at liberty to make the choices that we want, we cannot shy away from love's ultimate example-which is to lay down our lives for the other. The fault in us, which is exemplified by the actions of the hired shepherd, and which in fact is the source of all our other faults, is the love of ourselves-we cannot help but to be entangled in the love of ourselves. But to be free, free enough to love ourselves would require us to let go of ourselves, to forget ourselves, to renounce ourselves and to realize that perfect freedom is not simply about our freedom to choose between products or candidates for office, but it is also about choosing to lose ourselves so we can find ourselves again in God. I believe that the more we give ourselves up, the more we find true peace, the kind of peace which can only be found by the still waters.

Like little children, we desire all, and yet we desire nothing-for all that we thought we lost, we found them again in the shepherd who loves us and supplies our needs. Amen.