

This Fourth Sunday in the Easter season is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Psalm 23 gives us wonderful images of God's shepherding love. Actually, all the readings spell out God's love for us, and our responding with love -- love for Jesus and for others.

So, how can we know if we love Jesus? In the basement of my house in Detroit, there was a boiler. A boiler is made of heavy cast metal: it is impossible to look into a boiler and see how much water it contains. *But you better not let it get too low.* So, running up beside it was a small glass tube, which served as a gauge. The water level in the glass tube, which *can be* seen, shows the level in the boiler, which *cannot* be seen. When the tube is half full, the boiler is half full; when the tube is empty, well, you're in trouble -- the boiler is empty. So you ask, "*How does the world know if I love Jesus?*" Look at your gauge. Your love for other people is the measure of your love for Jesus.

I stayed at a retreat center for a couple of weeks one summer. The women who ran the center had a very large garden. One day, the woman in charge of the garden asked a young volunteer to help pick the green beans. They were ready that day and on the supper menu. The volunteer answered, "I'm just not into picking beans today." The wise old woman simply replied, "Honey, the beans don't care." Love shows through where our hands and feet take us. Love from God goes the distance in serving others.

Love isn't about thinking right, although what happens in our head is important. Love isn't about feeling right, although what our heart tells us should not be ignored. Love is more than a feeling; it goes beyond the glow of good hormones. Feelings are, after all, notoriously fickle. They come and go on a whim. Indigestion or a cloudy day can sour them.

It is easier to "*act your way into a new way of thinking*" than it is to "*think your way into a new way of acting.*" "*Fake it 'til you make it,*" Alcoholics Anonymous advises those who can't imagine what sobriety might be like for them. Thinking about buying a mop doesn't get the kitchen floor clean. Buying the mop might help, but it doesn't get done until I actually start moving that mop around on the floor. I can think about Mother's Day; I can even buy my mom a really great card. I can put a stamp on it. But if I don't actually mail it, that unsent card represents a missed opportunity to turn a loving thought into the gracious gift of loving action.

The poet Emily Dickenson once wrote to a friend: "*To love me is one thing, to tell me you love me is another. Please don't remain silent any longer, for the realm of silence is large enough beyond the grave.*" When you tell someone you love them, you make love more concrete and real. *Real* and, ah, here's the rub: accountable. If you *tell* me you love me, and you don't *act* like you love me, I can call you to account for that. And that's uncomfortable, to say the least. Love needs more than good intentions. So, God's Spirit continues to urge us and equip us to put love into action.

Being faithful means getting real with our love. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* says that fruitful and faithful disciples take the step of loving obedience, even when they don't feel like doing it. You know, the beans don't care. Reaching out with deeds of love toward *others*, in obedience to God, will often transform our hearts in the process.

The call to follow Jesus requires a commitment from us; it's more than we would be inclined to give just on our own. A hen and the pig were walking along, and approached a church. They read the advertised sermon topic: "What can we do to help the poor?" Immediately the hen suggested they feed them bacon and eggs. The pig thought for a moment and spoke up, "*There is only one thing wrong with feeding bacon and eggs to the poor. For you it requires only a contribution, but for me it requires a commitment!*"

We may show up figuring that we're following the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us, yet we end up thinking and acting more like the Hired Hand. In fact, the call to be a disciple of Jesus demands more from us than we are able to give, if we are putting ourselves and our own plans and perceived needs at the center of our life. Standing before God, a *self-serving* shepherd's heart may summon up some bravado, but no true boldness, for it stands accused – and, serving only self, it is guilty as charged. God's law demands more than the old unredeemed Adam and fallen Eve in us could ever accomplish.

Jesus says "*We ought to lay down our life for one another.*" So, then, two questions: "Why do we do that?" and, "How can we do that?" We might do it to try to make ourselves worthy, to rely on keeping God's Law to save us. The Law says "*Do this and live!*" Sounds clear enough, but we glance around, wondering then, "am I doing enough, can I ever be good *enough*?" Fear and shame lock us in our own inner prison.

But here is the good news, Gospel: *we don't have to keep doing it that way.* The Good News of Jesus frees us. God encourages us to turn ourselves over to the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the Old Adam and Old Eve in us. We can entrust our hearts to this love; it transforms us, it gives us a new Spirit, God's Spirit, who gives us a new heart, new life, new possibilities, and new hope.

The demands of the Law say "*Do this and live!*" But God's Grace says, "*Live, and do this.*" We are God's own beloved children, and God promises freedom from the prison of guilt and despair, pride and compulsion. We can love *because God first loved us.* We love with the Good Shepherd's love. And God has work for us to do with that love.

One day, as he began his daily prayer, a Desert Monk saw pass by him a cripple, a beggar, and a beaten man. Seeing this, the Holy One went deep into prayer and cried, "*Great God! How is it that a loving Creator can see such suffering and yet do nothing about it?*" And out of the depth of that prayer, God answered, "*I have done something about it. I made you.*"

In the midst of a storm, a young child runs into the parents' room, terrified. The mom assures her child that he will be fine: *God will take care of you.* Between sobs, the child grabs his mom's hand, and pleads "But I need a God *with skin on.*" We can see "God with skin on" in the person sitting next to us, and in the needy stranger; we can hear "God with skin on" in the preached message, and in voices joined in song, and we get a taste of God at the meal that strengthens us for continued loving. In Jesus, we have "God with skin on" for us, and it's his love that we share.

How can we be “God with skin on” for those around us who shiver in fear and despair in the valley of the shadow of death? First, we must call out to God in the midst of our own valleys; we are important to God, and God the Good Shepherd is always seeking to bring us back when we get lost. Look for God’s mercy and love, and listen for how God calls you and cares for you. Ask each other what it might be that God wants and needs this congregation to be doing, so you can reach out and use your gifts most effectively to serve others in God’s name. God works through us; each and every one of God’s people has a gift to bring to the party. As you seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, help each other identify those what those gifts are and how you might, together, put them to work.

Our arms are the only ones God has to hug people. So, let us be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers; let us love in truth and in action. With head, and heart, and hands, may we be led and strengthened to love God’s world, just as God so loved the world that he sent Jesus, and us, into it.