Easter 4

April 21, 2024

 “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and

 sees someone in need and yet refuses to help?”

“Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

In our ongoing attempt to understand, as Christians what do we say to those who wonder what can the words of two millennia ago possibly mean for us now? Is John saying that words and speeches about love mean nothing, that we shouldn’t be loving in what we say but only in what we do? Many of us have plenty of the world’s goods: is it our duty to stand on a street corner with baskets of cash and give away everything? And yet we hear that in order to be true followers of Jesus, we must give away all that we have – possessions, wealth, family, friends.

One of my favorite storytellers is Garrison Keillor who you may recall was the host of the radio broadcast *A Prairie Home Companion*; in my neck of the woods, it came on from 6-8 Saturday nights, so being a church musician who had to be up and at’em pretty early on Sunday mornings, this was my *Saturday Night Live*. What struck me then and still does is Mr Keillor’s knack for taking the small – even the tiny - and turning it into a magnificent tribute to God the Creator and Preserver, by whom all things are made and have their being. He could recall something as seemingly insignificant as a ladybug, crawling on my son’s arm, and weave it into a 40-minute recitation, replete with surprise twists and turns, framed in magnificent color, and descriptions so alive, you knew you were there.

There’s much to be said about what might be seen as small – a tiny seed that burgeons into a full-blown forest, a quiet touch or gesture that begins a lifelong relationship. It could be said that even God started out small in creation: God didn’t do it all in one day: there was an order to it, but not everything happened instantaneously, simultaneously. Most of us are not destined to be larger than life: I can’t remember the exact percentage, but I recall someone in undergraduate school declaring that very few of us would end up on stage, giving solo performances with or without orchestra. There are numerous roads to success in every vocation: most, in my opinion, involve teaching. Likewise, giving away all that we possess in order to be a true follower of Jesus does not have to be in the form of emptying our bank accounts or refrigerator or pantry shelves. It does mean, I believe, to put ourselves second or third or fourth; and to pay attention, to be vigilant, to watch, to listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. Do unto others as you would have them do for you. When someone knocks on the door or rings the bell, we need to get up from that incredibly comfortable La-Z-Boy lounger and respond. When a friend is being evicted from his apartment, we need to at least weigh the possibility, the practicality of can we put him up here until he finds somewhere to live? why don’t we take the afternoon off and drive him around to look at places? maybe he’ll let us help with the deposit. When the first Sunday of the month approaches, let us hear the Shepherd’s voice, reminding us of our silent vigil on the front lawn. May we feel Jesus’ nudging us as we go through the dizzying aisles of Costco to pick up **two** 6-packs of canned chicken instead of just enough for us: we can put it aside for the next cash/food drive-thru or how about if we take it to the Food Shelf right now, on our way home. Thinking beyond our own needs are daily opportunities in our normal routines “to love in truth and in action” as John bids us. It is so easy to look at the endless tragedies in the world and become so totally overwhelmed that out of shame we are moved to inaction: I’m just one person; what can I possibly do to help? Or, as the young man did on Friday, we can become so unhinged by circumstances around us that we “paint ourselves into a corner” and decide that a wildly extreme gesture is called for; the “truths” that are coming at us from so many different directions have driven us off the cliff. But there is no need to think in terms of huge, impossibly superhuman gestures that will catch the eye of news media; just look beyond our own little patch of green pasture, remember whose we are and listen for the Shepherd’s voice, calling us home, calling us to help gather others home.

I worked with a sublimely gifted church musician when I was in graduate school. He used to refer to his choir boys – always the one who had been particularly difficult in the most recent rehearsal or worship service - with such affection, calling them “the little lamb.” He was not married, had never produced any of his own children, but loved and nurtured those kids – other people’s children – with a love one can only describe as the Good Shepherd’s love. Though I may be in the valley of the shadow of death, threatened by personal destruction, if the Lord is my Shepherd, I will follow where he leads; and through the grace of Christ, may my actions always reflect the truth that is from God.