

"The Plain Truth"
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter
Lectionary Year C

April 25, 2010

Texts: Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

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If we are honest this morning, we have to admit that we are a lot like those particular people who were gathered around Jesus on one occasion when he was at the temple in Jerusalem, as our Gospel lesson for this morning tells the story. These people say what they really are feeling. With frankness and boldness they ask Jesus, "How long will you keep us in suspense? How long must we keep playing these guessing games? If you really are the Messiah, tell us plainly. Please, Jesus, no ifs, ands, or buts; if you are God's Son, just tell us. Don't beat around the bush. We want the plain truth."

We are like them, aren't we? We want to know about things upfront, beforehand, and in detail. We don't like surprises. We want to know exactly what we are getting into, and we want it spelled out in laymen's terms. Leave out the fine print and the legalese. Don't put any spin on it. Give us the bottom line. No matter what it is we are talking about, plain and simple, that's the way we want it explained to us. Shoot straight with us. Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts.

But there is a problem. Not all truth can be discovered that way. There is some truth that can be obtained strictly intellectually, but *most truth must be gained experientially*. Some things can't be explained beforehand; they can only be understood after the fact. For example,

until you have children, you can't know what it means to be a parent. You can read every book in the bookstore about parenthood, but until you are in that situation, it's a truth not fully actualized. The same is true for marriage. That's why I am more than a little suspicious of pre-marital counseling. The problem with it is that it is *pre-marital*. Until you're married, you can't begin to get a handle on the things I or any other person in a counseling position would like for you to understand about marriage.

We can list many other areas of life in which this is true. You can study the stages of grief, but until you lose someone you love, you don't really know what it is to grieve. You can sympathize with someone who is going through a divorce, but unless you have been there yourself, you don't know what it is like. Intellectually, we know about a whole range of things like having a mid-life crisis; going through the empty nest syndrome; suffering from clinical depression; struggling with alcoholism; making the transition to retirement; moving into a nursing home; being laid off at work; having major surgery; enduring physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; being suicidal; living in extreme poverty.

We know about all these things intellectually, but unless we actually have dealt with these things personally, we don't really know about them.

One of my good friends says that it's the difference between the true and the real. Things may be true when they involve someone else; they become real when they happen to us. *The true becomes the real only by experience.*

Knowing Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is one of those things in

life that has to be experienced. Faith is not just mental assent; it is a way of life. That's why I don't like to talk about faith only in terms of believing. There's more to it than that. The knowledge of God in Christ has to be learned by experience. *In the Bible there is more doing that leads to knowing than there is knowing that leads to doing.* Let me repeat that. In the Bible there is more doing that leads to knowing than knowing that leads to doing. The people who come to Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem want it the other way around. They want to know fully. *Then* they can decide what to do about it. But it just doesn't work that way when it comes to faith.

And that is exactly what Jesus says to them. They demand of him, "Give us the plain truth about who you are." He responds to them by saying, in essence, "If you want to know who I am, then do what those who have come to believe in me have done. Follow me. Become my sheep. Then you will be able to hear my voice. Then you will know about me. Then you will belong to me. And then you will have eternal life and will never perish."

Do you want to know about Jesus? Schubert Ogden, who taught me theology in seminary, used to say that the answer to the question of who Jesus is, is at one and the same time the answer to the two questions, "Who is God?" and "Who am I?" Jesus, the divine/human revelation of the true nature of God and the true nature of humanity, shows us both. So do you want to know the truth about God and at the same time the truth about yourself? Then follow Jesus. Become the sheep of his pasture. Let him guide you, protect you, nurture you, feed you, provide for you, care for you. Let him shepherd you, and you will

discover for yourself experientially who God is and who you are as well.

What happens when we become his sheep and he becomes our shepherd? The psalm for this morning lets us see what it will be like. We will lack for nothing we really need. We will experience the peace and tranquility and spiritual restoration that come from lying down in green pastures and being led beside still waters. We will be guided to make appropriate choices, to take the right paths, to follow the routes that will be in our best interest and bring us closer to God and closer to the quality of life God means for us to experience.

When we become the Lord's sheep and allow him to shepherd us, we are able to go through tough times without being overcome by them. We aren't spared the tragedies of life, but we are provided with the resources we need to deal with them. Even our enemies don't get the best of us, for our trust is in the strength of the Lord. We can live with confidence and hope, rather than in anxiety and fear. Our living as the sheep of the Lord's pasture brings us security, peace, and joy. We experience the richness and the fulfillment of what we often call an abundant or authentic life. It's a life of mercy and grace, and it is so very good.

What I have said is the plain truth, but it can't be understood any other way except by action, by doing something, by following, by becoming the sheep of God's pasture. The only way to discover that the Lord is our shepherd is to become his sheep. There is no other way. By following the Good Shepherd, that's how the true becomes the real for us.

And there's one more thing that needs to be said. The shepherd

we are to follow—the one whose voice we hear, the one who gives us eternal life—do you realize just why it is he knows us so well? Have you figured out why he can read our minds and is so attuned to our hearts? Our passage from the book of Revelation tells us why. It is because *the Good Shepherd is also the Lamb of God*. We are called to be the sheep of the One who knows fully what it means to be a sheep, to be completely obedient to a master, his Father, and even to be led to slaughter for our sake.

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the truth, and it is the plain truth. But it is not simple to obtain. It is not a truth you simply can grasp and appropriate intellectually and without experience. Neil Young once wrote these lyrics: "To give a love, you've got to live a love; to live a love, you've got to be part of." So it is with Christ. In order to understand the plain truth of who he is and what he has to offer you, you've got to live that truth. And you live that truth by being part of the sheep of his pasture. Then he becomes the *Good Shepherd* to you. Then the truth of how much you are loved and cared for by your shepherd becomes real. Then the truth of how precious and valuable you are to God becomes the plain truth.