

Jesus in your face  
The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector  
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church  
Virginia Beach VA 23452

[www.aidanvbva.net](http://www.aidanvbva.net)

April 7, 2016

Acts 9: 36-43 John 10:22-30

This is often known as Good Shepherd Sunday and pastoral images of a warm and fuzzy Jesus abound. One parish in Virginia Beach always has a lamb show up for the kids. This is all very nice, but that isn't really the case with our gospel this week. This is Jesus in your face or at least in the face of the temple leadership.

Who are you? The "Jews" demand plain simple answers. That is the essence of our gospel and our reading from Acts. The temple authorities are asking Jesus to declare who he is. Jesus replies with I have shown you who I am. Luke is showing that Peter by his actions is one with authority before he encounters Cornelius the Gentile Centurion that we will hear next week.

However, questions of faith are never simple and the answers, the ones that really matter, certainly don't come out of our heads. That is the point of both John and Acts today. Questions of faith are matters of the heart and matters of experience. We really cannot think our way into believing because it just doesn't work. I know, I tried it for the better part of 20 years and spent most of that time outside the church! I was as great a skeptic as you can imagine, but something changed. I moved from faith being an intellectual activity to one that in the words of John Wesley "warmed my heart."

Last week we heard the story of Paul's conversion. This conversion story is so important that it is repeated later in Acts. Saul doesn't sit down and have a nice quiet conversation with the other disciples and then says. "Oh now I understand, thank you for explaining this I think I'll convert and change my name." God whacks him up side of the head and says pay attention I want you to follow me not persecute me.

In our Acts passage two healing stories are told to establish Peter's authority. Just prior to his healing of Tabitha, which by the way translates in English to gazelle, which sounds so much nicer than Dorcus, he heals another man. This then sets up the vision where Peter is asleep on the roof and he sees a sheet filled with animals come down three times and he is told to kill and eat. When he states that he has never eaten unclean food, God says nothing he has made is unclean, in other words where declares all food is clean. Then follows the visit by Cornelius, but I will not steal Dana's thunder for next week. None of this is head stuff, but conversion, transformation of the heart first.

Jesus has shown the authorities who he is by what he has done. The first half of John is often called the Book of Signs. They are miracles in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. The healings and miracles in the synoptic are all about Jesus being compassionate and loving as well as powerful. Yes they point to his power but that is not the emphasis. In John all the miracles are signs that point to who Jesus is.

Yet the authorities don't seem to understand. As I was reading this at the noon Bible study on Thursday I got to thinking about what in storytelling we call the MIT, the Most Important Thing. The most important thing in this passage is the fact the signs show who Jesus is, that he is the Messiah. Words are not needed just action.

I was aware of just how in your face Jesus is with the temple authorities as I read this out loud. I was thinking that if I was to perform this what would Jesus sound like as he says, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." Stop and think for a moment the Jews he is addressing are not just folks on the street but the leaders of the temple. He's telling them they are outsiders. They are relying on words and Jesus tells the ultimate insiders that they are clueless and do not belong.

In the commentary Feasting on the Word the author referred to a parable written by a Jesuit. There was a man who traveled to the Amazon. He came back to his town and tried to tell people about it. How to convey to them the sounds and smells of the rainforest was a huge challenge. He made them copies of the maps that he had created that showed every water fall, every river, all the details he could include. Many people copied the maps until they all had maps, they all read about and many considered themselves experts. They would often gather to discuss the maps long after the man was gone yet they really didn't understand because they had never experienced what the traveler had experienced. I understand this analogy, I could describe the rain forest to you all day, but unless you have climbed up Angel Falls in Venezuela like I have, you cannot truly understand.

That is the problem of religion. We can't really understand it if the only way we know is in our heads. Yes we need to know the facts of the story, but we also need to experience the story, the power of God. One of the things that was lost in 1050 when the Eastern and Western churches split was the experiential, mystic relationship with God that the Eastern Church has continued to pursue. The west moved into the scholastic world and lost the mystic in a labyrinth of doctrine and creeds. Fortunately there are those who are recovering this tradition with Centering Prayer, Ignatian bible study and other types of meditation that are now growing in western Christianity.

One of the things that I hope to be able to add to our worship and Christian Formation by pursuing my storytelling program is to make the stories more than words on the page. I do this by spending as much time praying over the passage as I do memorizing it. The idea is to get all of you to engage on many levels, but most of all to be open to allowing the story to touch your heart in ways mere words cannot do.

Jesus says that his sheep know his voice. They know his voice because they have learned to listen for it. They hear his voice in the gospel stories and they look for him in all places and in all ways.

Jesus calls us to follow him, not worship him. This in turn is not about what we say, what creed we profess, but do we follow that last great commandment, to love one another as Jesus loved us.

As Sr. Ilia Delio says so well, "Christian life is a commitment to love, to give birth to God in one's own life and to become midwives of divinity in this evolving cosmos. We are to be wholemakers of love in a world of change."<sup>1</sup>

Following Jesus is not for the meek and mild. I speak often of a God of love, but that does not mean everything is all warm fuzzies! Following the good shepherd is very hard work and getting more challenging every day. We all hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, but in our busy world we often do not recognize it for what it is. Our God antennas are not always tuned in to the right station if you will. Sometimes, often, God is found in the suffering in the world and we become his sheep when we decide to respond. Remember what Jesus said at the last supper in John, "Every one will know that you are my disciples, (my flock, my sheep) if you have love for one another."

The Good Shepherd is calling his sheep. May all of us listen and respond to his voice. AMEN!

---

<sup>1</sup> Ilia Delio, "Love at the Heart of the Universe," *Oneing*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2013), 22.