

April 22, 2018

(John 10: 11 - 18)

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, we have an overabundance. Too many core readings. We have the 23rd Psalm...the best known psalm ever sung, for sure...**and** the Good Shepherd reading from the gospel, **and** even the reading from Acts, which is as nice a witness under fire as we will ever hear. So, the problem is that we like shorter sermons, not longer...that may come as a surprise. Where does the Spirit lead us today?

Last Sunday, I shared that last Sunday's gospel reading may be the most important of the year for we Christians. Bigger than Christmas. Bigger than Easter Day itself. Why?

Because the very real body of the risen Jesus was very, very real for them. Instead of running for cover and hiding for their lives, now they ran, straight out, into the world. That message of intense, heart-felt euphoria is repeated in the reading from Acts for today. They are captives now, and are asked, "In whose name are you doing these things?"

Let's face it...who on the street asks you or me that question? That is the difference between the church of then, and the church of now. Peter and the others are shaking things up and, when called out about it, he says quite simply, "It is Jesus of Nazareth, who....what? Was crucified by you...and now, what? Is raised from the dead.

God raised Jesus from the dead.

So what? What is that to us?

You want to know why this world seems so Godless? You wonder why everyone's at soccer, or at the first tee, or at Wal-Mart this morning, instead of here? Why everyone is everywhere BUT here? Why some 90+ percent say they believe in God, but that...in reality...God is (quote) dead (unquote) in the 21st century, and that you and I sitting here, wasting our time in this museum of a church, are too thick or brainwashed to get it? Why?

God raising Jesus from the dead...means...what to us? No one asks me in whose name I do whatever I do...and I bet the farm that you are no different. Yet, here we are, still in the season of Easter...and so what?

I looked at my sermon for this Sunday three years ago, and threw it out. Focusing on the 23rd Psalm and only barely touching on the detail of being raised with Christ in his resurrection...saying that was detail for another day. What a big mistake then, I thought, but perhaps it would be a better example of how the Living God continues to get us to focus, to open us. After all, life is for living...which should mean living for God.

The 23rd Psalm. If we would/could just take the time to dwell in its lyrical beauty and imagery. The actual tunes of these psalms are long lost to us across time, so we can only imagine how they sounded on the heart. Now, we are just left to reading them and, of all of it, the connection key is the psalm's center: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." David then declared that neither death nor sin frightened him. We Christians now, according to St. John's gospel, can go one better, as we now have the right to read this psalm in the light of the passion of Jesus, giving greater force to the imagery.

In Jesus, as the Risen Christ, we are not afraid of death and sin because, through Christ, we have "been there and done that." We have died with Christ and have been raised with him in newness of life. The Cross and the Resurrection get it done. But, in our lives, let alone even from our pulpits...we do not hear it often enough, and do not live into it. Maybe because we really do not know what that means.

We do not have the understanding in our reasoning, and do not have the passion of our hearts, to have the explosive effect upon everyday life that the apostles and earliest disciples of the church did. That is because you and I cannot will it. By our own efforts, and by our own desires, we have done as much as we can. Yes, we strive to be, and project to others, that we are loving, are friendly, are welcoming and accepting. And, yes, we also strive to be, and project the news to others, that we are engaging and involved in the community...hopefully in various ways and "missions" right here. But, again, let's face it...unless we do this, and far more, in the name of Jesus as the Risen Christ, the world and community around us does not know us, or our efforts, as any different than any other good, beneficent and well-meaning community group. And, if you ask the Kiwanis, the Masons, the Elks, or the Lions, nobody is joining them either...or asking them the question that seeks to identify the source of their passion, "In whose name are you doing these things?"

Stop for a moment. Notice the subject of the sentence, the question. They want a name. Why?

Think about it hard for a moment. Why would these authorities ask for a name? Why indeed.

See, again, left on our own...as we tend to think we are in this particularly difficult moment as people of faith in the 21st century...we get backed into a corner with the dilemma. Find ourselves becoming distraught and depressed over the lack of answers clearly evident to us as Christians in this world, at this time. Assuming that we even want to, how can you and I get that "passion" that drives our lives and all we do in life to the point of being asked, in essence, "OK, who are you, and what do you have going on?" How do we get positioned, or transitioned, so that it becomes so very clear that this Episcopal Church is not just another building in town, but instead the epicenter of operations for carriers of resurrection, contagious with forgiveness?

For answers, it all comes back to Jesus. He says "I know my own, and my own know me"...and

that “they will listen to my voice.” This is the answer in our time, as well as to those apostles under examination:

You want a name? We will give you a name.

The gospel reading reveals that God knows us, and calls us, by our names. In my ministry at the court, when I interview the clients, at some point I always ask them if it is alright for me to address them by their first names...and it always seems to have profound effect. First, they like the courtesy of being asked. Asked what? The almost universal presumption that using one’s more familiar name of being addressed means a deeper level of concern, of respect and intimacy in conversation, of “breaking bread” if you will. That is what God wants with us: not to call us “hey you”, but rather let us get down to the reality of the depth of the love of our relationship with each other. Because we might as well face up to it, and acknowledge the obvious: he knows who we are, what we need, and the person we are coming to be.

Why do we have so much trouble recognizing our being made in the very image of God? How can we miss that the sacredness of who we are is safe with Jesus because it is a reflection of his own sacredness? At times we may want to be someone other than ourselves, and we may live vast tracts of our life according to this mistake, but Jesus only wants us to be the person we are made to be, the one he redeemed us to be, and so he calls us each by name. The change of heart that allows us to transform into that reality is the bottom line stuff that we call “born again”, and “eternal life”. Giving my heart to God through Jesus...by trusting in him as the Risen One, just as these wild and crazy apostles now did...is the key not only to my salvation in this life at this moment, but the real future of God’s church.

That is amplified by today’s Epistle reading, from the first letter of John: “We should believe in the name (there’s that word again)...the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him and he abides in them”...and, “if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God”.

It is a simple matter of giving ourselves, by giving our hearts, to God through Jesus Christ...to the point that he abides in us, and we in him. Then we move out into the world around us, with boldness before God.

Live in boldness before God, as the apostles did...professing that the power that manifests itself in our life comes from God, in the Risen Christ. Be a “name dropper” in your actions and conversations with others...actually naming God. The world, let alone the people who you come in contact with, are starved to hear...in everyday, casual conversation...about God. The world today would be a better place, starting right here. Because, we are encouraged....commanded actually...to call upon the name of God...as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit. Amen.