**Weekend of Sunday, April 30, 2023**

**4th Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Year A**

**First Reading: Acts 2:42-47**

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:19-25**

**Gospel Reading: John 10:1-10**

**Sermon Title: *“Love God & Love Other People”***

**Theme**

*Today is sometimes called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Jesus is called the “gate” of the sheep in today’s gospel. The risen Christ opens the way to abundant life. He anoints our heads with oil and guides us beside the still waters of our baptism. Each Sunday he spreads a feast before us amid the world’s violence and war. We go forth to be signs of the resurrection and extend God’s tender care to all creation.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Acts 2:42-47**

42[The baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.
 43Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:19-25**

19It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. 21For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.
 22“He committed no sin,
  and no deceit was found in his mouth.”
23When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. 24He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

**Gospel: John 10:1-10**

 [Jesus said:] 1“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.
 7So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

**Sermon**

This passage from Acts 2 caught my attention.

42[The baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

47bAnd day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I wanted to preach this sermon on the First Sunday of Easter but it was a short week and didn't have the time to get my thoughts worked out. We'll see how I do now. Warning: I am likely to offend. And don't bother contacting the Bishop, I emailed her the following:

I would have never done this ten years ago.  I have always been a "company man" including my vocation as pastor in the ELCA for nearly 26 years.  But I am frustrated with our church.

I came from a manufacturing engineering education and background where there are absolutes and facts, laws of science and formulas –no need to think about some things.  When I went to seminary, one of the transitions I had to get used to was that the seminary taught *critical thinking* - the profs actually did want me to reflect on the assignments and tell them what I thought - there were very few absolutes.

Then why does the ELCA think they have to have a position paper on every social issue when the issues only divide the very fellowship we are trying to shepherd? I resent it that the ELCA foists its position on its churches and members.

I do not consider myself a liberal or a conservative (as the terms are used in society today).  Zion has a trans member, a lesbian, and a gay couple.  That has caused some minor problems. We've lost a member or two.  I have defended those who stayed but not because of their sexual identity.  That is not my concern.

I ask them three questions,

1. "Do you love Jesus and call him your savior?"
2. "Do you want to call him Lord of your life and be one of his disciples?"
3. "Do you want to live out your life of discipleship through Zion?"

If those answers are yes, I invite them into our fellowship and will defend them in front of other members who are opposed to letting *those people* in.  But I don't need the ELCA to write a position paper on that!

We are a church in decline and my concern is that we have lost focus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his mission to go and tell, teach and baptize.  I feel like the ELCA (Ever Liberal Church for Anybody), in its desperation to remain relevant, significant, and viable, is trying too hard to address every social issue in this ever-rapidly changing culture.  The latest email from ELCA Churchwide Council,  [https://elca.org/News-and-Events/8193](https://elca.org/News-and-Events/8193%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)  is an example of the ELCA being about everything but Jesus, in my opinion.  Check me on this: "Jesus" "Christ" "Christian" are not anywhere in the email.

I don't need a lecture about how the church *is the church* when addressing these issues.  I get it.  And I don't mean to sound like I am lecturing you - I am not.  When Jesus was asked what the big issue was in his opinion, he gave two:  Love God and love other people.  It seems to me that when we form a committee to argue the ELCA's position on abortion, for example, we divide people into sides rather than love them, and through our love, lead them to God, whether they are for or against abortion.

Change the issue to LGBTQ+, or to Reparations for Native Americans and People of African Descent, or whatever the issue du jour is and I fear that people will cease to find our sanctuaries as places that do indeed offer sanctuary, and in our haste to become the Ever Liberal Church for Anybody, we are really only the church for like-minded liberals.  In my opinion, the ELCA's focus on every current issue causes us to lose focus on the big issues, as Jesus saw them.  He probably only gave us two priorities because he knew that would be enough!

From the First Reading for this weekend:

42[The baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

What a brilliant idea!

So yes, I am frustrated with life in the church, and by the church I am talking about the ELCA, the *Ever Liberal Church for Anybody*.

This week I was emailed the minutes of the latest meeting of the ELCA Church Council that I referred to in the email to the Bishop. Yes, in the same way, the local church has a Council, the ELCA has a Council. Among the minutes were:

* Adopted "Earth's Climate Crisis" as an official social message of the ELCA.
* Authorized development of a social message on the epidemic of gun-related trauma in the U.S.
* Maintained the pending status of requests for development of a social message on child abuse and child protection and a revision of the 1990 "Message on Homelessness."
* Received the report and recommendations from the Task Force on the ELCA Discipline Process for Rostered Ministers of Color.
* Formally received a proposal for exchangeability of the diaconate between The Episcopal Church and the ELCA. Through the proposal, endorsed by the Lutheran Episcopal Coordinating Committee, the ELCA and The Episcopal Church recognize each other's deacons as authentic.

And two weeks before, the ELCA announced the launch of its Truth and Healing Movement. The focus of the initiative is to increase the church's understanding of the impacts of colonization on Indigenous people in past generations and the present.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't honestly know that much about Lutheranism or the ELCA before I went to seminary. I was born and baptized into the Lutheran church as an infant. As an adult, I lived out my life of discipleship in my local Lutheran church attending worship regularly and participating in discipleship activities that appealed to me – aren't I just like people?

When I went to Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, a seminary of the ELCA, I quickly learned that their method of teaching was called "critical thinking," which might be defined as "the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue to form a judgment." This was quite a contrast from engineering school where I was taught absolutes and facts, laws of science and formulas to resolve problems. In engineering, there is plenty of room for creativity in design, but creativity is limited by absolutes and facts, laws of science and formulas. Not so much in the life of discipleship as I learned in Seminary.

Since graduating from Trinity 26 years ago, I have enjoyed leading you into discovery. I hope that when I preach or lead Bible study, you come away feeling like a fellow explorer, not my student.

All that to say, as I tried to articulate to the Bishop, in our attempt to be everything to everybody, we could end up being nothing to anybody. Or as someone once said, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." Well, I stand for Jesus, who is the only example of godly living that God thought I needed!

I think Jesus Christ our Lord knew that we would get distracted by every wind of change, and perhaps that is why he made it so simple: Love God, and love other people.

* I don't own a gun – a handgun or a semi-automatic rifle - I don't even own a squirt gun, but I'm not going to condemn you if you do.
* I have an opinion on abortion. If you want to know it, ask me.
* Until I read the email from the ELCA Council I didn't know there was a different "discipline process for rostered ministers of color," and now that I know, I wonder why? It seems racist to me that we have one.
* Do we need to put it in writing that the Episcopalians are "authentic"?

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

I don't have the option to teach an adult Sunday school class, but if I could have one, I hope that I could identify my opinions as just that, my opinions, and honor you by hearing your's, and then remind us of what Jesus said is ultimately important and absolute: Love God, and love other people.

That doesn't mean that there are no absolutes. We have the commandments and the teachings of Jesus. But God in God's wisdom gave us free will to demonstrate our devotion to God by living out our lives of discipleship the way we see fit. That will be enough.

42[The baptized] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

47bAnd day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Maybe the reason we are a church in decline instead of adding to our numbers day by day is because we devote ourselves to everything but what Jesus demonstrated and what the apostles taught, and to fellowship and prayer.

I confess I can get distracted from my vocation. I commit to doing better. Call me on it when I go too far left or right. Will you commit to doing better too?

**Prayer**

O God our shepherd, you know your sheep by name and lead us to safety through the valleys of death. Guide us by your voice, that we may walk in certainty and security to the joyous feast prepared in your house, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Now, just to be clear, I am not advocating leaving the ELCA. I would rather be a voice for change within than one who took his jacks and left. I'm just frustrated.