

Easter 4, Year A
John 10:1-11
April 13, 2008
Bill Ellis

St. John's gospel was written at a time – most likely in the 90's of the first century - when the community of Christians was beset by a number of forces beyond their control. There was first the power of the Roman government, which since the reign of Nero had begun the sporadic persecutions that would mar the next two centuries. There were also those who, partly because of these persecutions, were attempting to convince Christians to abandon this faith and return either to Judaism or the religion of the Pantheon. Finally, more recent scholarship has revealed that there were a vast number of different sects – grouped very roughly under the term “gnostic” - each claiming to be the true representation of Christ, and each actively recruiting people with claims that no one else beside them had the secret of eternal life. It seems likely that John's community was losing people from time to time for each of these reasons.

This historical context helps us to understand why this Gospel refers to these outside forces as “thieves and bandits,” and declares that they come only to “steal and kill and destroy.” I have no doubt at all that the leadership of the community that produced this gospel were absolutely certain of the eventual triumph of the understanding of Christ which proclaimed him as the bearer of the transforming love of God meant for the whole world, but in the mean time

they also had to know that there would be losses, there would be those attracted to another message, and this passage was meant to warn people against succumbing to threats of harm or the blandishments of such preachers.

There is a real sense in which that is not at all our situation any more. There is no physical risk in being a Christian, and our Constitution explicitly protects the free exercise of religion. Moreover, the vast majority of us now realize that there are many perfectly valid ways of being faithful to Christ. Parish members may well be sad when someone leaves one congregation for another of a different denomination, but no one thinks that such a person is going to hell for that. Thus, it is difficult to relate to the kinds of concerns that prompted the sort of language we hear today. Yet, there is a point of contact within this passage between that era and this one, and it is found in the attitude of Jesus toward his flock when contrasted with the attitude of all the others who seek access to the sheep. That attitude gets to the heart of the gospel.

What we see from Jesus in this passage is that his sole concern is for the sheep. To abandon the metaphor, his sole concern is for us here gathered. He wants only what is best for us, and thinks not of himself. His goal, succinctly stated at the end of this passage is that we “may have life, and have it abundantly.” This is a crucial principle for interpreting the whole gospel. When he commands us to love, as he will, he does this not because God will be mad and get us if we don’t, but because we will be less, we will be diminished if we

don't love. When he commends us to have a generous heart and spirit it isn't that if we aren't generous God will be angered, it is that if we aren't generous we will find our own lives circumscribed by the fears which inhibit our own spirit. When the call comes to worship, it isn't that if we don't worship then God will destroy us, it is that if we don't worship then we won't understand our own true selves, and thus will live inauthentic lives that distort not only our true purpose, but our true place.

This passage, along with many others in this gospel, makes one thing abundantly clear; we worship the God who lives for us, we love the God who first loved us, and indeed who by that love made it possible for us to love. In the end, most simply put, salvation is not offered so that God will have fawning sycophants to worship the Divine Presence. Salvation is offered so that we will be able to live as we were meant to live, and to discover our true selves.

This contrasts remarkably with much of what we see in this world, both then and now. For then as now there are lots of people and groups who assure us that their only concern is for us, but who really are concerned for themselves. One egregious example comes to mind from our fairly recent past and that is Jim Jones and the People's Temple, and the terrible tragedy of Jonestown. Here was a remarkably charismatic leader who convinced a lot of people that he could lead them to the Truth. He convinced them that his concern was for them and for their welfare, and it just wasn't true; his concern was for himself, for his glory

and honor. The same thing happened with far less catastrophic results in Oregon when Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh took up residence on the Big Muddy Ranch outside of the tiny town of Antelope promising genuine enlightenment to those who gave up everything to follow him. It just wasn't true; neither he nor his associates were truly concerned about the people they purported to serve. They were concerned about themselves and their own power, and when that power was threatened they resorted to increasingly paranoid responses culminating in an attempt to poison people in a restaurant in The Dalles.

We needn't look only for these large and well known examples to see this kind of thing going on. Every one of us has from time to time been confronted by those who insisted that their only concern was for us and our welfare, but who were not primarily concerned about that at all. I have heard this when I was buying a vacuum cleaner. I heard it once when I got fired from a job with an irrigation ditch digging company. These are benign examples, part of the standard vocabulary of everyone who wants to sell us something, or avoid an unpleasant situation or assure us of their concern. Preachers, myself included, do this all the time. It isn't quite true. Certainly I do care about you all, very much, and when I am hurtful to you, whether it be by something I say from the pulpit or some way I neglect you all pastorally, I feel bad, often very bad. But as I think about the development of my ministry and my career and my life, I must face the fact that I am doing this for me, and if I didn't get a lot of gratification

and a decent living from what I do, I wouldn't do it, and would find something else that was gratifying and did meet my needs.

I am completely average in this. I don't know anyone who doesn't operate this way a big hunk of the time. Certainly this does not make us all into thieves and robbers, but when we deny this truth about ourselves and declare in solemn tones that we are interested only in the welfare of others and never for ourselves, then we are at the least being dishonest with ourselves and others.

For the truth is the God revealed to us in Christ is the only one whose only concern is for us. To follow Christ as best as we possibly can is to stake our lives on the One who cares for us unreservedly. In this era, as in all eras, that is very important. No matter how powerful any of us are, we all live lives that are so often measured by what we can do for others, how productive we can be, how we affect the bottom line of whatever company or cause we are working for. I don't know that this is bad, for often people become very productive, very creative, when pushed in just this way. But it is hard us, and it is wearying, and it creates a kind of pressure that few really want to live with. To follow the voice of Christ is to follow the one who has set all of that other stuff aside, it is to follow the one who sacrificed everything for us, even in the end life itself.

The difference between that voice and all the other voices we hear in this world is that this is the one voice that authentically, truly, always and ever cares first and foremost for us. So today we are told to listen carefully for the voice of

that one who has our welfare at heart. Many voices will make that claim, but only one is truly and completely authentic. Listen for that voice, and having heard it, then follow, for you will find in following that voice, no matter where it takes you, that you have life, and have it abundantly.