

The fourth Sunday in Easter is known, for obvious reasons, as Good Shepherd Sunday. The shepherd, the good shepherd, is a traditional image for rulers in the ancient world. As our psalmist tells us “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters” (Psalm 23 v1-2) The Lord is both guide and protector. Sheep stay together in flocks for safety, but that safety is more certain when they have a shepherd to guide them. Their shepherd leads them to food and water and keeps them safe from predators ... as well as from themselves because they are easily startled and scattered - at which point they are easy to pick off. While shepherding could be a dangerous business, and David talks about killing lions and wolves to protect his flocks, Jesus takes shepherding to a whole other level when he says, “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” (John 10:11b)

Jesus is willing to lay down his life of his own accord for those who follow him. He says that his life will not be taken from him even though he knows that he is going to his death. This is where John’s gospel is so different from those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus’ life is taken from him – although he goes to his death obediently and willingly, he does experience distress in the Garden of Gethsemane whereas the Jesus of John’s gospel is focused on glorification. Nevertheless, the net result is the same. Jesus’ willingness to lay down his life in obedience to his Father gives us new life in him, a way to live in the world that is not of the world, and the hope of life eternal when our lives are done.

Our Lord is provider, protector, and leader. Like sheep, as followers of Jesus, we need to keep our eyes on our leader. We flock together in church communities so that we don’t become prey to demagogues or distortions of the gospel. We trust in our communal discernment of what the scriptures teach us to stay true to God’s commandments to help us live together into the Kingdom of God that dawned when Jesus began his ministry, a kingdom where justice, care for the poor, the outsider, and the vulnerable are the norm, and above all, that we love each other as Jesus has loved us. Jesus’ death, however, tells us that this will not come without sacrifice on our part, giving up ourselves in ways that the world may see as irrational, naïve, or foolish. But sacrifice on behalf of others, when freely given is a true sign of the love that we share in and through Christ.

In today’s passage Jesus expresses his love when he says, “I know my own and my own know me.”

When Jesus says that he knows his sheep he is not just saying that he can tell sheep A from sheep B. We can know someone by name, know of or about someone, but that is not the kind of love Jesus means when he says that he knows his sheep. It is closer to the knowing we experience when we love someone and whose love in return enables us to be more fully ourselves. We can take comfort in being known by those we love; it makes us real. Nevertheless, none of us can truthfully claim to know all there is to know about someone. There are things we know about each other, there are things I know about you, but you may not realize about yourself and there are things that I know about myself that I may not share. (Thank you Joseph Luft) We all keep something back, even from those we love. It could be from fear or it could be from not wanting to hurt the other person. There are also the things that we

don't know about ourselves – and no one else knows about us either. No one else that is, except Jesus.

Jesus knows his sheep, he knows us, each and every one of us. He knows our strengths, our weaknesses, our fears, hopes, joys, and triumphs. He knows our sorrows, our regrets, our secret shame, and our disappointments.

In Psalm 139 the psalmist says

*LORD, you have searched me out and known me; \*  
you know my sitting down and my rising up;  
you discern my thoughts from afar.*

*You trace my journeys and my restingplaces \*  
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

*Indeed, there is not a word on my lips, \*  
but you, O LORD, know it altogether.*

At the same time the psalmist admits that this can be uncomfortable. To be known so intimately, even more than we know ourselves makes us vulnerable and small, it reminds us that God has made us, God knows how we work, we can run but we can't hide. It is an awesome and terrifying thing to be known by God.

This knowing does not bring rejection, Jesus came to restore our relationship with God, that we might know God through him so that in this divine knowing we may find peace, and joy, and strength, and love, forgiveness for all that we are not. Our best response then is to give ourselves over to God, laying down our lives, trusting that God will allow us to take them up again and bring us to green pastures and still waters, and keep us safe when we walk through the shadow of the valley of death.

Amen