

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Exclusive Claims, Inclusive Invitations"
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Fourth Sunday of Easter

One of the things a Minister is called to do and be is what I'd like to classify as Christian plumbing. A plumber goes to the root cause of a stoppage, clog, leak or dysfunction in the system. Now normally we as Christians don't like to go into the yucky stuff that might be down that drain. We prefer to use a little bit of Drano to try and deal with the clog. Unfortunately, as our pipes get older, the problem with using Drano, is that we may in fact not only not clear the clog, but also corrode the pipes to the point that the pipes develop holes and leak. The very measures that we try to take to solve a problem are the measures which cause a worse problem. So at some point, we finally say "we need help." We call the plumber and he dismantles the system to a certain degree, and finds out, as we did in one of the washrooms in the Hall this week, that there are lots of reasons why the pipes are clog. There is a pen down the sink, a top of the pen, probably the same pen, and lots of dental floss balled together in only what can technically be termed plaque or yuck. Once this stuff is removed the water flows freely and drainage continues as it should.

Now with thanks to our Board chair for the details of this parable, and hopefully with some determination to look at our own lives, we turn back to the Scriptures where God shows us our clogs, and from where the fresh water flows.

There was a clarity and a focus that imbued the earliest followers of Jesus. They were accomplishing miraculous healings, but not seeking glory for themselves, they chose to give the glory back to the One they experienced, touched and loved as risen from the dead. The lives they lived reflected the miraculous life of the One they followed. They were bold and courageous. They had no problem confronting in Acts, chapter 4, the high priest and his family who were at the forefront of handing Jesus over to be tortured to death. They also spoke in such a manner that those who had been trained and educated to the highest levels of the day noted their ability. The high priest and his family noted that these mostly uneducated fishermen put forth their case with such

authority and clarity that something powerful must have happened to them. The Scripture says, in the verse after the passage we read, that “they took note these men had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13)

Something powerful had happened to the disciples. Peter was able to proclaim boldly that there is no other spiritual path to wholeness but the one that acknowledges Jesus as Lord, tortured to death, and risen from the dead to prove his case. There is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved from our sins. Such an exclusive claim is reiterated by the apostle John and the apostle Paul. The whole of the New Testament is clear on this point that we need to firmly stand for Jesus Christ as uniquely the way to God, and inclusively invite others to this way.

Now for some this raises many issues in a time in our history where all ways are equally valid and no way can be criticized or judged. Some have even asserted this claim leads to violence and war. If this is true, how indeed can any spiritual person make a universal claim?

But the fact of the matter is that there have always been rival truth claims and there always will be such. What we are called to do is to be clear on where we stand. This does not mean that we hold our position with arrogance or pride. Every Christian who calls herself/himself a follower of Jesus Christ knows or should know that it is a position arrived at only by the grace and mercy of God. So we speak as Living Faith says, as one beggar showing another where the food is to be found.

Some of us engage and have engaged for decades in inter-faith dialogue. What I mean by inter-faith is between Christian and other religious paths. Inter-faith dialogue requires that each participant knows where they stand in their own tradition. This means that each presents their truth claims honestly and in a straight-forward manner, knowing that there is disagreement, but seeking to understand the other out of a position of strength and grace and love. To the degree that we are confused about our own faith, to the degree that we are unwilling to present the claims of Jesus that the Scriptures encourage us and even require us to proclaim, to that degree we will be unable to truly have the kind of dialogue that we seek. There was no fear in the early disciples in proclaiming what they had been given from the Lord himself.

We too should have no fear in proclaiming what we believe. It is true that we may not agree, even within our own congregation. It is true that we may get stuck in the areas which are considered essential to the faith, such as the Apostles' Creed. Nevertheless, we should continue to speak as clearly and boldly as we can, and ask God to direct us.

Today there is a great fear of disagreement to the point where in 2001, where a worship service took place in Ottawa about the World Trade Center attack, and in this service, prayers were basically not allowed for fear of presenting the Christian or any other religious path.

We need to move beyond this fear to talk to one another. We also need to understand where we stand in terms of Christianity. If we are not committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as the One to whom the whole world is called, then we need to acknowledge that. Conversely, if we are committed to Jesus Christ, tortured to death, risen from the dead, and alive forevermore to proclaim and be the Way to God, as well as the best life path, then we need to be able to acknowledge that as well.

If we are confused and not sure where we stand, or certain that we are neither for nor against Jesus, then we need as well to say that, so that we grow in our position for or against the Lord, and be very conscious of the fact. It takes courage to acknowledge where we are personally in our spiritual path.

It also takes courage to acknowledge that we who follow Jesus are sheep in Jesus' fold. We all know the 23rd Psalm, at least a little bit. Many of us have probably not had the privilege of spending much time with sheep. If you're like me, you grew up in the city and don't have much farm experience. But I have had, in later years, some experience of a small flock in the northern part of the Okanagan valley in BC.

Here I learned that sheep are skiddish to strangers. They like their routine and what they know. They don't like change. And we are like them. They grow very accustomed to the Shepherd's voice. They know who feeds them (like most pets know). They know when it's time to go out to the field and eat. They know who the lead ewe is, and they follow her. You know the ewes and their lambs are separated from the

ram. The ram tends to get aggressive when he notices change. So while the ewes will run away from a stranger, the ram will set his position and try to head butt the stranger away from his territory.

Of course the lambs are beautiful, and a stranger can even pick them up in their arms, with the shepherd nearby. I've done this. I've gotten dirty doing this. Have you ever noticed that whenever you encounter new life, it's messy? This is true whether it's a puppy or a kitten, or a lamb, or a newborn baby, or planting a garden. New life brings messes. The new message Peter was proclaiming was messy and difficult, but good and true.

As we choose to follow the Good Shepherd, we are aware that some of our cherished and comfortable notions about spirituality and our own personal philosophies will be challenged. This is the nature of growing faith. This does not mean that a traditional position is an immature position or that we will always have to change away from the faith that we have received. What it does mean is that we have a lot more reflecting to do in our personal lives on what it means to follow Jesus.

Whether we have given ourselves to God for many years, or have only recently begun to follow God, we have much to learn. I know I do. We have much to learn about listening to the Good Shepherd's voice (John 10:3) as those ewes did in the flock in Armstrong. In fact, the shepherd could call out a name of one of those sheep, and she would baa.

We have much to learn in discerning the voice of Jesus and other voices. Such discernment goes to the core of who we are and our spiritual identity. Such an identity goes a long ways when we are looking for wisdom in the midst of a global flu pandemic, if that is indeed the case. We hear something different almost everyday.

Our hopes and fears can and should be taken to the One who knows us and our lives, our world and everything about the context in which we live. Let us turn anew to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who will guide and direct us now and into the future. Let us continue to bring our hopes and fears to Him.

Let us pray.