

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

So often, we focus our attentions in the peace traditions on eliminating “Us” and “Them” dynamics. However, this week’s text, from the tenth chapter of John, seems to build upon these dynamics. We hear of Sheep, and those entering the sheepfold by the correct way or the wrong way, those who are called, those who are not, the gatekeeper, and a stranger, those to whom we run and those from whom we run.

What are we to do with this language? How are we, as part of a community of faith to deepen our engagement with the Other, when a text like this seems to deepen anxiety about those who are not known.

Text

“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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Comment

Ignatius of Loyola may help us find an inroad into this text.

In his “Rules for the Discernment of Spirits” Ignatius highlights the need for the faithful to know what “Spirit” or “Angels” are guiding them. While it may easily be understood that he’s talking about God or the Devil to be our influences, he leaves

his language sufficiently vague to allow that at times we, in our own instincts, are capable as being as good as the Good Spirit or as bad as a Bad Spirit.

In any case, Ignatius suggests that we all, when making decisions, can be influenced by good and bad spirits. He suggest that “The good Angel as the bad can console the soul, for contrary ends: the good Angel for the profit of the soul, that it may grow and rise from good to better, and the evil Angel, for the contrary, and later on to draw it to his damnable intention and wickedness.”

The immediate reading of Jesus’ words in this week’s gospel can come close to something like sectarianism. There are those who are “in” and those who are “out”; those who belong and those who don’t, those who enter into the sheepfold by the proper methodology and those who don’t. Whatever Jesus’ intentions in saying these words, whatever the evangelist John’s intentions in writing these words, it is entirely true that many people of the Christian faith have used these words for the purpose of sectarianism, of dividing-and-conquering, of elevating the few at the expense of the many. It is good, especially during the joy of Eastertide, to be reminded of our faith’s capacity for influencing wrongdoing in human dynamics.

The line between good and evil runs through the hearts of us all, Solzhenitsyn tells us, and perhaps this may be a helpful lens through which to read this week’s text. This starting point for interpretation may also be furthered by keeping in mind that in John’s gospel there are few mentions of demons. Indeed there are no exorcisms in John; the only time the word demon is used is in accusation where one individual seeks to discredit the intellectual or religious authority of another.

So rather than using this text to decide which group is the proper group, which shepherd is the proper shepherd, which gate is the proper gate, who the true-belonging is for and who the thieves are, we may see that this is a dynamics that runs the heart of every human. How are any of us entering into a sense of belonging in our own hearts? Are we seeking shortcuts? Are we depriving ourselves or others of love, responsibility, integrity and action? What voice are we listening to? Is it the voice that leads to belonging? Or the voice that leads to disenfranchisement?

In many ways, this short text could be considered to be on the same territory as the synoptics’ details of Jesus’ encounter in the desert with the Tempter. In both we are warned about avoiding shortcuts to integrity, about discerning clearly the vocation of humanity, of being warned away from a poverty of love and life.

Given that in John’s gospel Jesus is moving closer and closer towards the time when he is to raise Lazarus from the dead, a sign that lights the fire of fury in those determined to kill him, it may be that John is depicting Jesus speaking in public but also speaking to himself. Is he facing the consequences of his own actions? Is he recognising that he’d prefer a life where incendiary engagements with authorities were not part of his everyday? Is he reminding himself — as well as his followers — of the need to follow life abundant?

To view this text this way undoes our sectarianism, and causes us to seek wisdom in discernment when we are making decisions about our communities of faith, our circles of friends, our societies and our company. How can we make decisions in a way that calls all to belonging, rather than robs many of connection? How can we follow life abundant? How can we deepen the pathways of Life and Love in all of our work?

Response

Sectarianism, Cecelia Clegg and Joe Liechty tell us (in their book ‘Moving Beyond Sectarianism’ published by Columba Press, 2001) is when belonging has gone bad.

It may be worthwhile spending time considering the places of your belonging — family groups, friendship groups, faith groups, community groups — and reflecting on the ways in which your belonging to these groups has caused you to view those who are not part of the group in a negative or derogatory light.

None of us will belong to everything. There are people who are in a family and people who are not. However, what is interesting in the language of belonging is the question of borderlands. Are our borderlands of engagements with those not part of

our groups hostile or hospitable? Do we make it easy for people to join or leave? Do we judge? Do we see that there is only way way in and no way out?

These questions may be fruitful for you to explore in the context of your groups' belongings.

Prayer

Jesus,
Towards the end of your life
you began to see
the consequences of living
the way you lived
and you continued to live that way
anyway.
May we, who know the consequences
of speaking for the outsider
or being the outsider
of including the hated
or being the hated
find the courage to follow you
into life and love
even if we go through valleys of death and separation
on the way.
Because this is the way of Easter
And you have gone first.

Amen.