

Sermon: Year A, 4 Easter

Texts: Acts 2:42-47

I Peter 2:19-25

John 10:1-10

Over the course of eighteen years of ministry, by quick calculation, I can say with some confidence that I have now presided at several hundred burial services – far more funerals than most people attend in a lifetime. Though many might consider this a grim realization, I consider myself extraordinarily blessed for having had these opportunities, because nothing focuses life so clearly as facing its irretrievable loss. In a deeply humbling sense, all deaths are sudden no matter their circumstances. Someone who was distinctly present as someone vanishes, untraceably. And suddenly it is no longer possible to take his or her presence for granted, assuming that there will be another day, another chance to get together, another more opportune time to share something important. Death takes away all our convenient evasions – all the ways we avoid life's true richness by being so astonishingly busy with lesser things.

In the crucible of this hard reality, all we have to offer against death's void are words. We who remain speak and sing. We talk about what we remember, and we declare what we hope. God's Word preceded creation itself. God's speaking brought our very world into being. And in like manner, we, who bear the image of God, find our best refuge when someone dies in words that, mystically and therefore infinitely, abide in spite of death's utter silence and extend beyond the chasm of death's darkness, no matter how distant that is or seems. I have presided at several hundred funerals, yet I could probably count on one hand the number of services that did not include the reading of the twenty-third psalm. It is a simple statement, easily memorized, easily imagined. There are no complications included within it: no conditions that have to be met or agreements that have to be signed or expectations that first have to be satisfied. It gives voice to a relationship that has absolutely no quid pro quo. We simply declare that God is our shepherd, the shepherd of all life, and, thus, even when we are confronted by the "valley of the shadow of death" even here we have nothing to fear. We resolutely place these words between ourselves and all loss, and facing loss directly and personally, these words provide immense solace and comfort. They apply profoundly to the time of our dying.

Saint Augustine, however, was keenly aware of how readily our best virtues become our worst vices, and in this respect, we ought to be mindful of how easily we recite the twenty-third psalm with regard to our end alone, forgetting that these very same words apply just as profoundly to every single moment of our living. The familiar first verse is variously translated, with slightly different nuances, but each translation is instructive. Our prayer book offers two. The first rendition in the Psalter, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want," is nicely complemented by an even more emphatic declaration from the Burial Service: "The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing." These are not just the first phrases of an old Hebrew song; they are the first words of our entire world. They announce the root truth of all things across all time. We don't merely die in the trust of this statement. Our lives are themselves these very words made incarnate. We live them. We are these words embodied. Behind all circumstance, undergirding it and surpassing it, there precedes and remains this pronouncement. It is the ever fixed mark upon which the whole world exists. All of time is the progressive unfolding of the richness of God's abundance. Our lives themselves are God's goodness overflowing. We ourselves are in every given moment instances of the sureness of God's mercy, no matter what comes. No matter what threatens us. The triumph of evil, great and small, is therefore

always only ephemeral. For it is evil itself that, ultimately, passes away, because God, the shepherd, is tireless in love and acts toward the world with infinite grace. Lack is an illusion.

This promise is made without qualifications. It doesn't depend on our being good enough or faithful enough or pious enough. It is the precondition of our being. It is God's invitation to us that we live into this daring freedom. This psalm doesn't just provide solace; it declares the overturning of all our usual expectations and anxieties.

This can be seen in the actions of the first Christians as has been reported in the book of Acts. The report is subtle, but deeply significant. As the first believers gathered, they chose to hold all things in common. In essence, they each gave away all that they had as private possessions, which to our eyes, according to the rules of our world, is either impossible or irresponsible or deluded. It is a radical act that can only be done in full trust that God provides in such a way that we can, in truth, and in life, lack for nothing. Their first response to the Gospel was this generosity without limit and without qualification. They didn't first tally up needs and assess each person's relative standing. They didn't argue about fair distribution of goods or try to measure each person's deserving. They didn't try to establish peace among themselves by negotiating a reasonable standard of equality. They knew that they were already fully immersed within the boundless creating and redeeming of God, so they could be loosed from even all these things. They could imitate the very love that God shows to us and, then, from out of this first freedom, they could tend to the various needs of one another. Justice was the wonderful consequence of their prevenient generosity, made possible by the love of God.

We tend to think and act in just the opposite direction. Justice must be established first, we say. Then we can talk about peace. Then we can consider fashioning some kind of community. But until then – until the right balance of power and possession is agreed upon and realized – we will be at odds, and we will stand apart, with a host of unresolved wants and needs stubbornly positioned between us. And love, thereby, when it waits upon justice, is woefully truncated. It becomes a fragile emotion within families and a frail sentiment among friends, easily disappointed and easily dismissed. And love becomes completely irrelevant among broader communities and nations, never coming to words, never broached or given. Fear wins out. Anger motivates. For all the talk about our being a Christian nation, can you find one policy, one place, where love is the explicit expression and action of our governance. It's all camouflage, by which injustice continues as if it were a necessity.

The function of the church is to live by the words of the psalm as much as we die with them. Even better, our freedom is to make love as sudden as death is – surprising, as if arising from nowhere, not stunning us with an awful and ungraspable emptiness but with an astonishing fullness of presence, of beneficence, of grace given without condition, of peace offered unilaterally and materially. It is to spread a table in the presence of our enemies. This is the meaning of resurrection. This is the testimony of Eastertide. This is the overturning of the grave. This is the victory of God whose justice always and only follows after a greater love. And this is our calling, to follow in the same way, with the same word that defeats all death and, all the more, provides us life in abundance.

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