



THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 11, 2003

Acts 4:5–12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16–24

John 10:1–18

Jesus said, “I am the good pig farmer.” Sounds pretty odd doesn’t it? And so it must have sounded to the ears of those who heard Jesus say in John’s Gospel, “I am the good shepherd.” And while this isn’t true of pig farmers, shepherds in the early New Testament world, as you’ve heard me say before, did not have the best of reputations. Shepherds figure prominently in Rabbinic lists of thieving and cheating occupations. This classification of sheep herders as notorious robbers and cheats means that like the publicans and tax-gatherers, they were considered unclean and were deprived of religious and civil rights. The Rabbis ask with amazement how, in view of the despicable nature of shepherd, one is to explain that fact that God is call “my shepherd” in the Twenty-third Psalm.

Jesus compares himself to one of the lowly ones, one of the despised. And then he says that the good shepherd — yes, even the rejected can be good — lays down his life for the sheep. We’re so used to hearing all of this that we miss its inherent craziness. Let’s go back to the pig farmer metaphor. I am the good pig farmer. The good pig farmer lays down his life for the pigs. Now what sort of pig farmer would lay down her or his life for some pigs? Sure, sheep and pigs are cute, but no human being in his or her right mind would die for an animal. Jesus not only likens himself to one of the lowly and despised of his culture, but to one who is crazy enough to die in place of an animal.

St. Paul says, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” Such a foolish exchange, that Christ, the lowly shepherd Christ would exchange his life for us, his sheep – or if you prefer, that Christ the pig farmer would give his life for us pigs.

But the foolish exchange has only just begun. In Easter we celebrate that in our baptism we have risen with the Christ who died for us – our old self, the self of this dark world, the self of this valley of the shadows – has been exchanged for a new self – a Christ self. And so says John in our second reading, “that just as Jesus Christ laid down his life for us – we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” The foolish exchange keeps turning. First Christ becomes foolish, exchanging his life for ours; then baptized into his resurrection, his Easter, our old selves are exchanged for Christ’s self and then *we* become foolish, laying down our lives, exchanging our lives for the lives of others. It is our turn, as the body of Christ, to be shepherds to the world. Like all that is mystery, it is impossible to objectively define what it means to be shepherds to the world. Surely there are a thousand different ways to “love not in word or speech but in truth and action.” But it is clear that we who have the world’s good cannot see a brother or sister in need and yet refuse help.

Now I don’t know about you – but it’s at this point where I start feeling a little – oh, *inadequate*, maybe. That’s putting it mildly. I know there’s a big part of me that’s real good at the word and speech part – I can talk a lot about love, but I’m not so good in the “truth and action” department. I know the old self is alive and well – the piggish part of me that says, “I ain’t giving up my life for no sheep, no pig, no body.” I am by nature, sinful and unclean. We are all in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. On our own, we cannot

be shepherds to the world who love in truth and deed. Wretched pigs that we are, how do we become like Christ, giving of ourselves for the life of the world?

The early Church heard the Twenty-third Psalm as not just for funerals only – but as a Psalm that tells us how God makes us to be like God sees us – how God makes us Christ-like. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he maketh me to lie down in pastures green.” The green pastures are the proclamation of the Word and catechesis, the life-long study of scripture within the faith community. “He leadeth me beside still water, he restoreth my soul.” These are the waters of baptism in which we are given the very heart of Christ – and we return to that promise daily. “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overfloweth.” The table of the Lord’s Supper, the Holy Eucharist, the bread of life and the overflowing cup of salvation is prepared for us to give us the strength to be who God has made us to be – even in the presence of all that tempts us. And in baptism we were given the Holy Spirit, and the cross of Christ was marked in oil upon our foreheads forever and against that sign nothing shall ever prevail – not even our own selfishness.

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action. I cannot tell any of you how you will live that out in your daily lives. We must each of us decide for ourselves how we will love, we must each of us decide how we will give of our lives for the sake of others. What is clear is that the good shepherd, or the good pig farmer, if you will, shall lead us to love as fully and deeply as we have been loved. What is clear is that those deep and scary valleys of self-giving love always come with a guide – and you need have no fear. God is with you and goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord your whole life long.