

## *If Necessary Use Words*

Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2009

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Texts: Acts 4.5-12,  
Psalm 23,  
1 John 3.16-24,  
John 10.11-18

On Tuesday I attended a Forum at the Seminary entitled: Women, Leadership and the RCA. I have to confess that I was drawn by who was speaking more than the topic that day. What I wasn't prepared for was the feeling of deep conviction that came as a result of that time. I did not realize how hard it still is for so many women in the RCA to find places where they can use their gifts in ministry. By serving on the east coast and then coming to Hope Church I simply haven't encountered the kind of road blocks women in this part of the country still find. I was shocked and stunned on Tuesday to learn that this struggle is still going on in such painful ways in certain pockets of our denomination and some of those pockets are closer than you would believe.

The moment that really crystallized my sense of conviction was when my friend, Renee, began her reflections on where we go from here. She started by offering what she called a counter-intuitive proposal. She proposed that we stop baptizing our girl babies. She had found her own baptismal certificate and it included a prayer spoken over her at her baptism (that comes from the 1906 liturgy): "Guard, we beseech thee (O God), her life and health and fulfill to her your gracious promises. Incline her by your Holy Spirit to take the place which belongs to her in the Church of your Son Jesus Christ..."<sup>1</sup> Renee claimed that if we as a church continue to allow a conscience clause that gives permission to churches and classes to deny women the place in the church that the Spirit has provided them then we are messing with the Holy Spirit and that is not something that is wise for us to do. So let's just be honest and stop baptizing our girl babies.<sup>2</sup> Renee and her husband, Richard, baptized my baby girl and when I heard her speak those words, the tears and anger came....and quickly behind them was a sense of conviction.

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<sup>1</sup> From the 1906 Liturgy for Baptism as found in *Liturgy and Psalms* (New York: The Board of Education of the Reformed Church in America, 1968), pg. 43-44.

<sup>2</sup> She was clearly speaking in jest in order to make a point.

I wasn't alone. I heard some ordained folks from this church talking together afterwards about what it is that we can do. As several of us come from that experience to stand before this text, I can't help but wonder whether our love for our struggling sisters.....and it's not just our sisters, there was a man at that gathering who told us that he was pushed out of the pastorate of his church for advocating for women to come on their consistory. I can't help but wonder whether our love for our struggling sisters *and brothers* has been in word and in speech more than it has been in truth and action. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods (or in this case has the privilege of position in the church) and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? That is the question. And it presses at us from all sides.

Community and World has asked the consistory to consider what it means for us to say in our mission statement that we welcome people with varied interests, talents and backgrounds and live in a city that has a much wider and broader diversity of citizens than seems to gather here for worship on Sunday mornings. It's a complicated question and the consistory continues to wrestle with it. Our own denomination has wrestled with a similar question as well. We have added a sixth area of focus to Our Call as a denomination that we live into a future freed from racism. As we sit before this text these questions press on the church. Do we love our neighbors who come from diverse racial and ethnic, social and educational backgrounds more in word and in speech than we do in truth and in action?

When you make the move from 1 John to our gospel text today and listen to the way that Jesus describes what it looks like to love one another....the conviction intensifies. When Jesus contrasts the hired hands to the good shepherd he locates their difference in precisely the extent to which they will go to embody love for the sheep. The hired hand gets the job done but with the least amount of inconvenience and frankly will run at the first sign of danger. While the good shepherd invests fully in the sheep so that they know him by the sound his voice and trust him with their very lives knowing that the good shepherd does not hesitate to stand in the face of danger even when it threatens his own life. That puts a pretty fine point on the question of how far we need to be willing to go. The gospel of John in verse six makes clear that Jesus uses a figure of speech - an extended metaphor - with the Pharisees to say something about the nature of his ministry and about the nature of God. This is what God is like. This is

what Jesus' ministry will embody. And 1 John makes the move to say that this is what the life of discipleship is to be like.

This is the transition we find on this fourth Sunday of Easter: a move away from the post resurrection stories we've been reading these last several weeks to passages that bring us back around to the nature of God and the quality of community that is created when disciples seek to live into the good news of the resurrection. There is this movement we've been tracking through the stories of Eastertide that begins with finding these disciples who are completely disoriented focused inward on themselves caught up in fear and doubt. Then they encounter the risen Christ and are transformed when they discover that the love of God is stronger than death. All of these post-resurrection stories, as Gordon pointed out for us last week, have this very physical, tangible quality to them. The disciples see. They touch. Jesus speaks and eats with them. It's precisely through these deeply intimate and personal encounters with him that they are reoriented toward the world around them. Now with their eyes wide open to the people and opportunities right in front of them they "preach the gospel at all times and if necessary use words."

We were talking about this quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi last week with some students preparing to make a profession of their faith. It is a fairly accurate way to describe life among the early Christian community. Clearly there are moments when we need to open our mouths and speak. We've been reading about some of those moments for Peter these last weeks in Acts. But here's the point: they were strategic moments that opened up because of his engagements with the people he met throughout the course of his day. It was walking through the courtyard on his way to pray in the temple that he met up with that paralyzed man begging in Acts chapter three. Instead of passing him by and offering him some empty platitude, he stopped and spoke to the man. It is out of that conversation and all the things that transpired as a result of it that he finds himself on trial in front of the temple leaders here in our passage today.

That's what the writer of 1 John is calling for...a willingness to be engaged with the people who are right in front of us. He doesn't speak in generalities about poverty, he speaks about a brother or sister in need. The challenge is to translate those lofty ideals for love and peace and justice into concrete - in the moment - expressions of generosity and faithfulness. It's about what we do when our abundance meets real - in the flesh - in the moment - need. I want to be clear. This way of living doesn't preclude

large scale and strategic planning designed to get at root causes of human suffering. We need to engage that kind of work, too. It is vitally important work. It just means that we had better be sure that the things we say we value are being expressed in something more than our words.

As you listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd inviting you now to this table today, I wonder what you hear in that invitation. I wonder if you hear, as I hear, that sense of conviction pressing in on you today; some awareness of the strategic position where the Spirit is placing you; or some sister or brother in your realm who needs to feel or see or experience your love...God's love... and not just in word or in speech but in truth and in action.

Or maybe what hear in this invitation is of a different order. Maybe it's the part further along in 1 John. You realize you've crossed that line where conviction has turned to recrimination. You know the line I mean when it goes past a creative spark of inspiration (as some of us were feeling coming out of that seminar on Tuesday) to that paralyzing place of condemnation. If that's what you bring to this place today I hope you will listen very closely to the voice of the Good Shepherd who invites you to this table to be fed and nourished...to restore your soul.

This is the table of our Lord....come...come as you are...listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd...come to be fed, to be restored, to be inspired, to be sent. Amen.