

John 10:11-19

Today's readings in their portrayal of the interrelationship of theology, spirituality, and ethics are appropriate for Earth Day. It is clear that our planet is in danger due to the impact of humans on climate change, the focus on profit over sustainability, and our emphasis on short-term gains that threaten future generations. We need to listen to the message of the good shepherd and become shepherds of the earth ourselves. The Christian life is defined by God's love for humankind and reflected in God's suffering love in Jesus. Jesus' suffering transforms the world and models our own relationships as sacrificial and interdependent. Yet, we need to take into consideration the suffering of the non-human as well as human world if we are to be faithful to the gospel in our time. God surely cares for the baby humans and generations to come, but God also cares for the baby right whales, on the verge of extinction, and the flora and fauna endangered by human activities.

John's gospel proclaims God's abundant love. Christ is the good shepherd. God has "skin in the game," the sheep really matter and the shepherd is willing to suffer on their behalf. To those who see God as punitive and as the source of pain and disaster, Jesus proclaims that he came that we might have abundant life. Out of his abundance, the good shepherd cares for the flock and is willing to sacrifice for their well-being. God is intimately related to the world. God feels our pain and has a stake in our safety and healing. The good shepherd calls out to the flock and in listening to the shepherd's voice, they find wholeness and safety in life and death. Yet the good shepherd has other sheep. The good shepherd's love embraces the stranger, the lost, the lonely, the outcast, and persons of other faiths. Being one of God's own inspires us to welcome God's other sheep. There is no room for parochialism in God's pasture. Other sheep are also recipients of God's saving grace.

Are we hearing God's voice in the cries of the non-human world? In the groaning of the world, described in Romans 8? Will we respond to God's call and expand our circle of compassion to include "strangers," not only human strangers from other cultures and faiths; but strangers from other species, different yet intimately connected with us?

The words of I John point again to risky, sacrificial love. Those who follow Jesus are called to sacrifice for others. Only a suffering God can help, as Bonhoeffer says, and in our sacrifices, we bring life to the world and discover our connection with God. You cannot claim to be a fully mature Christian if you see suffering and don't respond. Love is more than a word; it is an action in which the self and other are one in the spirit and the well-being of others is as important as my own well-being. Opening to God means opening also to our full selves and discovering that God's love is greater than our sin, shame, and self-condemnation. Knowing how much God loves us, we can boldly ask for what we need, trusting that God will provide for our deepest spiritual, emotional, relational, and economic needs.

The words of I John invite us to live simply so that others can simply live. Our goods are not entirely our own, our wealth and property are not entirely ours to dispense with. Others' deep needs, including the needs of future generations, make a claim on us. The connection of our wealth and our use of resources to climate change, including extreme weather and drought, cannot be ignored. Our stewardship must be relational in the moment, and it must also be

preventative, that is, preventing harm to those around us by our own sustainable lifestyles. This is surely a challenge for today's Christians, who – even as we live simply – use more resources than persons in the developed world.

The reading of Acts 4 roots healing in divine power. The name of Jesus can transform our lives. It conveys God's authority and healing power. Its vibrations can change cells and souls. Acts 4 includes a tough passage that has been invoked to promote Christian exclusivism and exceptionalism. There is salvation, Peter says, in no one else. There is no other name by which we can be saved. At first glance, this suggests that only those who know Jesus can experience wholeness and salvation. However, this passage may also point to the abundance of God's love in Christ that gives life to every path of salvation. Wherever wholeness is found, it comes through Christ regardless of its medium. The power belongs to God and not to our religious symbols and doctrines; by God's grace the "other sheep" and ourselves find healing and salvation.

All four passages recognize that life is difficult and that we need a grace beyond ourselves. A shepherd may have to sacrifice for the flock. The poor are with us always and followers of Jesus need to let go of their largesse to respond to the needs of the vulnerable. The planet is in peril and we feel powerless to effect any change. Divine power is manifest to restore us physically and spiritually and liberate us from bondage of mind, body, spirit, and relationships.

Psalm 23 is equally concerned with life's challenges. We may walk through the valley of death. Enemies may surround us. We may find ourselves at risk and seeking shelter from threat. We cannot go around the valley, we must go through it. In fact, it is only a matter of time that we will face tragedy, diminishment, loss, and death. The words of Psalm 23 tell us that threat is inevitable and they affirm that God is with us, providing for our deepest needs in every threatening situation. There are times when we might wish to go around the valley, but have no choice but to go through it trusting in a grace and protection from a wisdom and power greater than our own.

When I read Psalm 23, I am reminded of St. Patrick's Prayer, written in a time of threat. Patrick sees God above, below, in front and behind. Moreover, I think of the Celtic "caim" or "encircling prayer" in which you draw a circle around yourself as a sign that wherever you go, God is with you. We need a sense of protection, ironically, to give up lifestyles that many will never have. Downward mobility is threatening to our comfort, security, and place in society. But, God is with us.

Presence leads to practice in today's readings. Out of the abundance of divine blessing and protection, and God's sacrifices for us, we bless and protect others. Confident in God's care in life's boundary situations, we are free to care for others, knowing that God's resource for us is plentiful and that as we sacrifice, we experience even greater abundance. We can live more simply. We can make decisions based on the well-being of the whole. We can sacrifice, knowing that God is with us.