

4 Easter Good Shepherd Sunday May 8, 2022

**Tell it Plainly**

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Sometimes, we just want to be told plainly, like the religious leaders in today's Gospel. Sometimes we get tired of trying to figure out complex metaphors, symbolism, opinions, theories, and stories and just want the simple version. Even the modern church sometimes wants simple, plain, information.

In an effort to get some of this information, the Episcopal Church recently commissioned a national poll called [Jesus in America](#) that asked Americans their thoughts on a variety of topics including the role of religion in the divisions in our country, the impact of the pandemic on faith and church attendance, and the importance of Jesus in society. The results of this poll were published in March. Some of the results were not surprising. For example, the pandemic has had a negative impact on church attendance in all denominations in our country. More Americans say they prefer watching church services on-line and feel closer to God when outside in nature than inside a church building. This information confirms what churches of all denominations are reporting.

Interestingly, most people polled said Jesus is important and has a positive impact on society. One result that caught the attention of our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry is the difference between how Christians think about ourselves and how we are perceived by non-Christians. To tell it plainly, according to the poll, Christians see ourselves as generous, kind, respectful, compassionate, loving, and friendly. But non-Christians say the opposite is true and associated Christians and the church with hypocrisy, judgmentalism, and arrogance.

I have to say that after many conversations listening to many kinds of people some who identify as Christian and some who do not, I have heard much the same. It can be easy to despair when we hear something like this. Or deny it outright. Being told something plainly does not mean it is easy to hear.

But our Presiding Bishop says we don't have to feel bad. We can be curious and use this information as it was intended: to inform our lives, our ministries, and to practice that stuff we preach; forgiveness, compassion, kindness, and understanding. We can let our lives and our work be our response.

It sounds like our Presiding Bishop may have been thinking about today's Gospel when he talked about letting the ministry and work be our response. On Good Shepherd Sunday, we might expect a different gospel reading; one where Jesus says plainly that he is the Good Shepherd, who loves and cares for his

sheep. But we didn't get anything that direct or comforting this morning. Instead, we got Jesus responding to the religious leaders' request for plain information by saying his work, in other words his ministry, speaks for itself. And it is this work that points to Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

The image of the Messiah as good shepherd appears frequently in the Old Testament. One of the most well-known references is the psalm we sang today, Psalm 23. This psalm is frequently read or sung at funerals and is the theme song of the popular BBC television series about a priest in a small rural community *The Vicar of Dibley*. Which is appropriate, because Psalm 23 is a poem about following the Good Shepherd all the days of one's life. It speaks of listening to and trusting God, going where God calls us, not where someone else tells us to go. It speaks of sitting at the table God sets, not the tables of greed, power, or prestige where you find kings, politicians, or billionaires. When we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, he shows both the obedience of one who follows God and who guides those who listen to him to those places of green pastures, and cool, clear, still water. The works of Jesus liberated people from oppression of illness, want, estrangement and restored them to their families and communities and to God. All the things that feel as refreshing and renewing as those green pastures and clear water. Jesus sets a table in all the circumstances and seasons of life, the one we are invited to every time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, or Holy Communion.

Jesus' words about recognizing him by his works can be applied to churches too, like the Presiding Bishop is encouraging us to do. We see this in our first reading this morning from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. This book was written long before the word "church" was used to describe communities of people who follow Jesus. But we don't need the word to recognize it. All we have to do is look at the work of its leader, a disciple named Tabitha, or Dorcas, depending on which language you prefer. That she had two names could speak to her importance or might indicate she led a diverse group of people and of course it could be both. Widows are mentioned as being part of the community. It was common practice of the early church to take in those who had no home like women whose husbands had died. One of the hallmarks of the early church was that it included women in membership and leadership, like we see in today's reading.

We heard when Peter learned of the work of Tabitha's church -which including making clothing – this makes me think of our prayer shawl knitting ministry who even though they have fewer members have not stopped making prayer shawls, as the bags of beautiful prayer shawls in my office give testament - and Tabitha's role in her church, he didn't perform a funeral. Which was most likely what they expected by laying her body in the upper room, where worship

services took place in those early house churches. Instead, he prayed and restored her to life. Not so she could go back to making clothing. Work in the sense Jesus was talking about is not production, or making things, or producing an income. Work in the sense Jesus meant was listening to him by creating ways for people to experience the love of God in Christ. For our prayer shawl knitters, that work is creating beautiful prayer shawls to give away to people for all kinds of reasons: comfort during difficult times, to celebrate graduations, confirmations, baptisms, reception into the church, and other major life events, and sometimes just to show they thought of someone, all of which are signs of God's love, which is good work. For Tabitha it was leading a church community that was inclusive of diversity and meeting the needs of the community that she could, most likely with the help of the members of her church. Her restoration of life was about renewing the church she led.

Tabitha's church can be an inspiration for us here at Church of the Good Shepherd as we hear plainly the results of the *Jesus in America* poll and listen to how Jesus, our Good Shepherd is calling us to respond. Since the poll indicated people feel closer to God outside, it is fortunate we have a lovely church yard and front porch where we can occasionally have worship services. The pandemic helped open our eyes to see these resources as more than just something to take care of, but as sacred ground where we can meet people where they are. When I sit outside on the porch for office hours, I often see people stop and take one of the free face masks we offer. We've given away over 3000 masks now. And when they see me, most of the people thank me, not just for the mask, but for being here. And they don't mean just me, they mean this parish. I have seen people of all ages park across the street and walk over to the COVID memorial in our yard. They take pictures of it. They spend a little time. And if they see me, they say thank you. For providing a safe place to express grief, to acknowledge the plain truth that we have lost almost one million Americans to the Covid-19 virus, and there are so few places that give people permission to acknowledge their grief, which is how healing begins. These are works that show people we are more than another building they walk by on their way to somewhere else and to us, they are more than passersby, they are beloved children of God.

We can be curious and learn more about how to enhance our on-line presence. We have gained new members who came to us because of the videos we posted on our YouTube channel and the links to recorded music on our website. Learning this, why wouldn't we explore how we can build on what we've done to more deeply engage people who are watching? Perhaps our Good Shepherd is calling us to such a place.

We are a community of people like Tabitha, like Peter, who have our flaws, we are not perfect. Sometimes we fall short of meeting expectations, sometimes we are too scared to hear the Good Shepherd, and judge without knowing more about a person or situation. But sometimes we confess our short fallings and forgive. Sometimes we are brave enough to be curious and learn what we need to grow closer to Jesus.

So, let me tell you plainly, on this Good Shepherd Sunday, how grateful I am for all of you, and I am so proud of the work we call ministry we are doing together. Sometimes we have had to change that work and adapt to the changes in our community, but our work still strives to embody God's deep abiding love and makes that love accessible to people of all walks of life. As we continue to grow, I know that work will continue because it is essential to our faith, to following the Good Shepherd all the days of our life.