

SERMON: 2018/04/22 (4th Sunday in Easter, Year B - "Earth Day") - Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18\_BTR

[Invite children to the front.]

In today's gospel, we hear Jesus describe himself as a 'shepherd', [v.11].

Now, obviously, He didn't mean this literally:

Jesus was a rabbi - which means a "teacher"/an interpreter of the Jewish scriptures, which we call "the Old Testament;" and to us, of course, He's the Savior (of the world [e.g. Jn. 3:16]); and in His younger days He *may've* been a carpenter - somebody who made furniture.

He was, then, speaking *metaphorically*: there was something about shepherding that He thought would help us understand the sort of person that He was. But to understand Him correctly, we need to be clear about how that was done in Israel, because different cultures approach the task (of keeping sheep) differently.

In England - where I'm from - and in Yorkshire especially where I lived - the shepherd is like a big, scary boss; an authoritative figure, who uses a dog to *corral* the sheep, to *force* them to go this way and that.

[Bring out stuffed sheep toy and a dog. Demonstrate using these.]

There's lots of barking and whistling; and the shepherd usually some way off.

He's quite passive, actually.

The dog does most of it!

And the sheep spend their days almost like prisoners inside fields enclosed within walls.

*But in the land where Jesus grew up*, the shepherds hadn't dogs (to impose their will); and they led not by giving orders from behind but by *leading* their sheep from one water hole or "wadi" to another.

He shared with his sheep the dangers of being "in the wild" and was often, by walking *at the front* of the column, the first to be attacked by fierce beasts like lions or wolves, or the first to notice trips and traps.

And *this* was what Jesus pictured - and wants us to imagine - when He speaks of being a shepherd.

That He doesn't ask us to do anything that He hasn't already endured; and as such we are offered a rather wonderful insight into the nature of God: that He isn't some faraway bully, but an empathetic, self-sacrificing friend.

Let's pray: Father God...

[Dismiss children.]

I don't know if you've noticed: but there is anarchy everywhere.

And it is spreading.

Now, let me be clear about what I mean by "anarchy":

I don't mean of the *Mad Max* type: gangs of irradiated mutants ravaging a blighted landscape - although the behavior of the children of some of my neighbours is comparable. [Wink.]

And, to "get real," I'm not referring either to 'the rapidly increasing number of failed states' in exotic places overseas,[n.1] Antifa's mischief-making, nor to the complex crises that have recently plagued cities like Baltimore, Portland[n.2], Ferguson[n.3] and St. Louis [n.4] - although all of these situations are acutely in need of your prayers.

(In fact, let me stress that: please, use your quiet time to intercede with Jesus for those disturbing headlines you hear on *CNN* and *Fox*.)

No, what I'm talking about is the ubiquity of rule-bending, corner-cutting, and promise-breaking that tarnishes our lives here in Warren County.

And I know you see it too.

Or maybe you don't?

Because it is so commonplace; so "*normal*".

It's what everyone does, right?

I'd taken my recycling down to the "Fairgrounds," and as I approached the compactor where you put the cardboard I noticed another - *supposedly* - good citizen throwing in boxes from household appliances which still contained their plastic and polystyrene "inners" - and was doing so in flagrant disregard for a handwritten sign that asked for them to be removed first.

Not a big deal you might say.

But what if everyone did it?

Well, the "chain" of processing those materials into reusables would breakdown, or at least come under more strain, which could disrupt it altogether.

And to prevent such an outcome probably means that, somewhere, someone is having to comb through our trash to remove it - likely small Chinese children [n.5].

So, why not you?

The other day Kimberley Feno began "plogging," which I think is awesome. [Check it out here: <https://youtu.be/PoOOvHnbMwg>]

It's a new phenomenon from Scandinavia where runners pick up litter along their

routes.

And I know the objections: "You're busy, against a clock, gotta keep your heart-rate elevated; those candy-wrappers don't belong to you."

And my reaction is *exactly* the same.

But our world is *deeply* interconnected.

The air I breathe today is the air you breathe tomorrow.

And the water, and the food, and everything else as well.

And actually, it is all God's - He made it.

We're only borrowing it (for a while).

And if you and I don't "step forward" and intervene, His creation - whether the woods where the deer roam or the canteen in my office-building - just gets progressively worse for everyone.

Fortunately, there is a remedy for at least the here-and-now, and that's (good) *leadership*.

Specifically, *Christian* leadership.

And what I have in mind when I say that is less about "taking charge" - about being "top dog" - but rather more about deciding to take responsibility for my context; *choosing* to exercise "ownership" over all of my environment.

Let's look at *Acts* together.

In our reading this morning we're afforded an opportunity to see two very different "models" of leadership in stark contrast to one another.

Firstly, some very poor, *worldly* leadership by what's described as an "assembly" of 'the rulers, elders and scribes...in Jerusalem', [4:5].

This is, in other words, The Sanhedrin - the governing council of Palestine, a.k.a. "the Sadducees."

And we see enough to discern that this venerable council seems to have been dominated - at that time, at least - by *one* family.

It was, in other words, a dynastic oligarchy.

Nepotistic.

A "mafia" of so-called "holy men," that *thrived* on giving orders; on sitting in authority over others, passing judgments. They *enjoyed* the prestige and power of leadership: the "entitlements." And relished exercising them: holding court, waylaying and inconveniencing those they thought of as their subordinates; their "inferiors."

And they did this all the while making compromises with those dreadful, pagan imperialists the Romans.

The men of this council, then, lacked integrity: they were *hypocrites*.

They looked for ways to "pass the buck." It *never* stopped with them:

Consider how, for example, at Jesus' trial, they pressed Pilate to do the executing:

Their hands were too soft, too pampered, too precious to murder Him themselves, [Jn. 18:31-32].

And then there's Peter, (standing below them).

No one asked him to be the spokesperson of the new Jesus-movement.

He's offered no salary or compensation.

But he "steps up" anyway and is the one to speak up; to be counted - and does so despite the obvious attendant risks: the likelihood of ridicule and even being put to death as a heretic.

But who else?

Why *should* another?

Why *not* him?

And so he *acts*?

(Which is the the very title - the theme - of the entire book, isn't it? *This is no coincidence!*)

The Roman Catholic church, of course, makes much of Jesus' pronouncement that Peter is the (singular) Apostle upon which He intended to "build [His] Church" [Mt. 16:18], but was the phrase prescriptive?

Was Christ actually *anointing* or, if you prefer, *recruiting* Peter to a particular role, or was it rather - prophetically - *de*-scriptive, that is to say: was Christ merely seeing in this flawed man the latent qualities of character that would, *in time*, "blossom" in such a way as to *propel* Peter to the front; the apex of the Christian community - the qualities of character that would mean he would "grasp the (thorny) nettle" of spreading the "Good News" about his risen, *living* Saviour despite consequence.

And we all (already) occupy "spheres" where we too can be a "force for good;" where we can be little "Peters" - those who don't duck responsibility, but willingly shoulder it: whether that is washing some used coffee-mugs in the kitchen sink, offering a lift to a transient, standing in local elections, or raising the "loaded" question of Sunday-worship with our neighbors.

*This* is what is meant by 'lay[ing] down our lives for one another.' [1 Jn. 3:16.]

So, as John says in our epistle: 'Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.' [v.18.]

Amen?

Footnotes:

1. Rahn, Richard W. (6th of July 2015), 'The Rise of the Failed States', *Cato*, available at <https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/rise-failed-states> (accessed April 20, 2018).
2. Flaccus, Gillian (2nd of May 2017), 'Portland, Oregon, mayor condemns violent May Day protest', *The Seattle Times*, available at <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/dozens-arrested-as-may-day-marches-turn-violent-in-northwest/> (accessed April 20, 2018).
3. Wulfhorst, Ellen; Wallis, Daniel and McAllister 'More Troops Deployed in Ferguson to Guard Against Fresh Riots', *Reuters*, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-missouri-shooting/more-troops-deployed-in-ferguson-to-guard-against-fresh-riots-idUSKCN0J80PR20141125> (accessed April 20, 2018).
4. Jenkins, Aric (16th of September 2017), 'Officers Injured and Mayor's Home Damaged During St. Louis Protests', *Time Magazine*, available at <http://time.com/4944795/st-louis-protests-jason-stockley-anthony-lamar-smith/> (accessed April 20, 2018).
5. Profita, Cassandra and Burns, Res (9th of December 2017), 'Recycling Chaos In U.S. As China Bans 'Foreign Waste'', *NPR*, available at <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/09/568797388/recycling-chaos-in-u-s-as-china-bans-foreign-waste> (accessed April 22, 2018).