



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

“WOUNDED AND WHOLE”
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

ACTS 4:5-12
PSALM 23
1 JOHN 3:16-24
JOHN 10:11-18

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
APRIL 25, 2021

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus is hesitant to offer descriptors of himself but Good Shepherd is one he offers us several times in John Ch. 10. In my last parish we built a new Chapel dedicated to Christ the Good Shepherd, and commissioned a beautiful Good Shepherd icon for it. Jesus the Good Shepherd is a beloved image in Sunday Schools the world over. Can the image Jesus offers us of the Good Shepherd grow with us into our adult faith life?

My questions this week have been about this. Does the gentle Good Shepherd from the rolling hills of Galilee stay there, or does he journey through the valley of the shadow of death? Does he come with us through the streets of New York and Minneapolis and Calcutta? Theologically the question can be phrased: Is the Good Shepherd also the crucified and risen Lord? Does he have wounds? To try to understand how the Church has understood Jesus as Good Shepherd, I explored how the Good Shepherd is understood in Christian art. There's nearly always the lamb over Jesus' shoulder. In some icons, there are no wounds in his hands. In the early Christian catacombs under Rome, we see a young shepherd, no wounds. But then, we remember that Christian art in the catacombs had to be in code, so as not to attract

attention to the presence of the seedling persecuted church gathering there to worship in secret. Wounds give Jesus' identity away... Think how many times in Resurrection appearances Jesus is recognized by his wounds. *Peace be with you, he says.* And immediately he shows them his wounds.

In other icons, Jesus the Good Shepherd *does* have his wounds. In these icons, the Good Shepherd not only speaks of laying down his life but has done it; the Good Shepherd speaks to us again risen and glorified, from the other side of the grave. Judging by Jesus' words today, his own understanding of Good Shepherd goes all the way to the grave and beyond.

Art reflects spiritual life and struggle. The difference in portrayal - wounds or no wounds - is telling. Our own devotional art is in two minds about what to do about the wounds of the Good Shepherd. Perhaps we can just not include them? Perhaps we can paint over them? We have deep ambivalence towards the role of suffering in the gospel...and in life. What value and place do we give to suffering? In Jesus' resurrection appearances, it is precisely the role - even the redemptive worth - of suffering that is the stumbling

block for many of the disciples, as it was when Jesus first foretold his death.

Jesus however does not allow his disciples to detour around the role of suffering. On the road to Emmaus¹, Jesus explains to the two disciples that it is necessary and an essential part of the whole that Christ should suffer. The disciples know this in their heads - how the Bible speaks of a suffering servant - but they cannot integrate this in their hearts. Christ goes to their spiritual blindspot and says: You are overlooking something. It is something you already know from the Scriptures so let me gently remind you. You are missing the pivotal role of suffering². In Luke and John, Jesus shows the disciples his wounds, and *opens their minds to understand the Scriptures*³, to help them understand the whole.

There are a couple of Greek words for wound - one is *plagma* (our “plague”). The other Greek word for wound is *trauma*. We may think of the wounds of Christ as the trauma of Christ. We know about trauma. We all have wounds. Suffering is part of life. We cannot detour around it. This is in no way to

¹ Luke 24:13ff

² Luke 24:26

³ John 20:19-20 and again with Thomas Jn. 20:27-28; Luke 24:27, 40-46.

glorify suffering. It is to recognize that suffering can mature us, grow compassion and deepen understanding for the blessings of human life. Many have testified that trauma can transform us. It is our wounds as well as our joys that make us who we are, that deepen us into our unique selves. Our wounds are identity markers, as they are for Jesus. I don't know why it is this way, but it is. Must it be this way? Only God can say whether God could have put in motion an alternate universe without suffering. We call that heaven. We intuit with the eyes of faith that God indeed creates such an eternity for us. Yet the gospel journey even on earth is always away from trauma towards healing. The wounds of Christ do not have the last word. The Good Shepherd tells us that he chooses to lay down his life for us. Our risen Lord carries these wounds of love into Resurrected life. Christ ascends to heaven, wounded but whole. Scarred but victorious. And perhaps that is what happens to us.

In the recent Chauvin trial, the deep trauma of racism and police brutality was on full display. The verdict was just and right. We may have thought we

would never hear it after shooting upon shooting, nail after nail in Jesus' hands, yet now finally: Guilty, Guilty, Guilty. This is not the *healing* of the trauma. This is *recognizing* the trauma. Trauma is repeated wounds. This is touching one wound. This is accountability for a particular act of brutality. As many have said, real healing goes beyond accountability to systemic institutional reform. But this verdict is a beginning. There can be profound good emerging from trauma. Sometimes terrible suffering sparks deep change and moves us closer to the kingdom of God in our own actions.

It was wonderful that Rev. Al Sharpton praying with the Floyd family gave thanks to God for this outcome. God and healing are intimately connected for people of faith. God and justice are always connected for people of faith. We are inspired by a Good Shepherd who protects the defenseless and abandoned, and puts himself in harm's way against predators.

Let us then imitate Christ and in our own way, offer our lives for others, for the justice of God, and for the healing of our communities. This we pray in the name of the crucified and risen Great Shepherd of the sheep.

AMEN

THE CHURCH OF ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS
487 HUDSON STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10014

TEL: 212.924.0562

FAX: 212. 633.2098

WEBSITE: WWW.STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG

EMAIL: INFO@STLUKEINTHEFIELDS.ORG