

Sermon
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 11th, 2025
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: Readings ACTS 9:36-43; PSALM 23; REVELATION 7:9-17; JOHN 10:22-30

You've probably heard me mention Father Gregory Boyle before. He is a Jesuit priest from Los Angeles, and the founder of "Homeboy Industries": the largest and most successful gang rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world.

In his book "Tattoos on the Heart", Boyle shares a story about our psalm this morning: Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd. Part of Boyle's work has been visiting prisons, rehabilitation centers, and lockdown facilities to say Mass. During one of these visits to a lockdown facility, a young man incarcerated there was asked to read the psalm, and to invite those gathered to join in this refrain: The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want. Thinking that he had the refrain memorized, the young man invited those gathered into **this** refrain instead though: The Lord...is nothing I shall want. Before anyone could do anything about it, those in the room joined in with a resounding: "The Lord...is nothing I shall want." 😊

Whether it's "The Lord", or "the Church", or "organized religion", there are many people in our world who would join in with the refrain "...is nothing I shall want". There are many reasons why this might be, but the verses that John's Gospel brings us today certainly have something to do with it. Jesus is asked whether he is the Messiah, and he responds with this:

"The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep."

"....because you do not belong..."

Damaging missteps and missed opportunities abound around this word, belong. You've heard quote Richard Rohr before as saying that Jesus never said "worship me", he said "follow me". Rohr says: "We worshipped Jesus instead of

following him on his same path. We made Jesus into a mere religion instead of a journey toward union with God and everything else. This shift made us into a religion of belonging and believing instead of a religion of transformation.”

Too often, the church has indeed focused on worshipping instead of following. And, the church has made “belonging” transactional instead of transformational. When belonging and believing are transactional, attendance at a service and what happens in liturgy and worship overshadows our growth, healing, and spiritual curiosity. Membership questions, requirements and penalties take over from the message of transformation that Jesus preached. It becomes about who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong, who is worthy, and who isn’t. These arguments, these distinctions, are about exclusion and exclusivism – the antithesis of the Gospel.

What does it mean for belonging to be transformational instead of transactional?

It helps to look to the origin and history of the word belong. It has meant “to be fitting, to be suitable”, but it has also meant “to go along with”. Jesus goes on to say “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” To understand “belonging” as “going along with” – as “moving with” or “following” Jesus reframes it. If we are going along with Jesus, following the path that Jesus followed, we will hear his voice. As Christians, we belong not according to what a particular group tells us, but by following Jesus, and by moving in the world the way he did.

Why would we want to “go along with” Jesus, why would we follow him? Jesus is God with us. God entered our time and space to be with us, to show us that we are loved more than we can ask or imagine. God came to be with us in Jesus to draw us into relationship – into a relationship that can never be broken. God came to be with us in Jesus asking us to join in a mission of repairing and healing our world by following the way of Jesus in our lives. We belong to God, and we find our sense of belonging, we feel it, by living the way that Jesus did, by following the path he walked.

What was the path Jesus took? Jesus walked on the margins, on the edges of society. The disciples were commanded to go out into the community, to be

with the vulnerable and the marginalized, and to love as Jesus loved. We are asked to do the same thing.

Following a path that goes to the margins, to the edges of our society will stretch us. Following the path Jesus walked asks us to be in difficult situations and not to leap to judgement and exclusion, but to be curious and to be willing to wonder, to ponder, willing to question what we are seeing and hearing. It means being willing to hold opposites rather than rushing to reconcile them. Being stretched brings growth, and growth can be painful. We need to attend to that pain, we need to attend to our own need for healing. Curiosity, growth, and healing are about transformation and change, not about transaction. The way of Jesus is about movement, it's about changed lives: ours, and the lives of others.

What does this look like out in the world? Our first reading from Acts points us in the right direction. We hear about Dorcas, who cared for widows – widows who would have been isolated, disconnected from that world without their husbands. Dorcas – Tabitha – acted in solidarity with those women. This is the path that Jesus walked, and Dorcas continued along that path – a path of love.

God came to be with us in Jesus to show us that we are not alone, and we are called to remind one another of this – we are called to be with one another, with love.

Back to the story I mentioned at the beginning, about the psalm refrain “The Lord – or the Church, or organized religion – is nothing I shall want.” If the way of Jesus is about transformation and change in our lives, and in the world, why do we gather here on a Sunday morning? Why would Sunday worship be anything any of us would want?

Part of it, of course, is about being shaped and guided by Scripture, listening to and “breaking open” the Word. Part of it is sacramental: invisible grace being made visible in the waters of baptism, and in the Eucharist. Another part of it though, is that we gather here for that reminder from one another that we are not alone. God is with us, and we are with one another. Our liturgy, our worship reminds us that we are all connected. Our liturgy revolves around shared faith, and common prayer. Not all of our prayers will use words that we'd choose if we were praying on our own. Not all of our expressions of faith resonate with all

of us. We don't all like the same hymns. This is a way of practising being with one another to prepare for being in the world the way Jesus was. As we sing and pray we remind ourselves of the incredible diversity in our humanity. We have an opportunity to consider that words and songs that don't resonate with us individually, do resonate with someone else in this place – or with someone praying the same prayer on the other side of the world. This is one of the gifts of our Anglican tradition. We practice unity in the midst of difference here on Sundays, and there is transformation and change and growth in this that then live out in the world.

This morning, know that you belong – know that you belong to God, and that God loves you, unconditionally. Know that your belonging is about following the path that Jesus walked – your belonging is transformational not transactional. May we be transformed in the way of Jesus, and in that transformation, participate more fully in God's mission of love in the world, today and every day, in Jesus name. Amen.