

April 21, 2024
The Fourth Sunday in Easter: Good Shepherd Sunday
St. Stephen's, Catlett; St. Andrew's, Ada
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Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

The Church in all of its glorious diversity – Western, Eastern, Catholic, Protestant, and others – has been engaged in a fierce debate since Martin Luther echoed St. Paul and insisted that we are saved “by faith alone, through grace alone.” Some, including the letter of James, argue that “faith without works is dead” (2:20), and Matthew’s Gospel issues a dire warning to those of us who fail to feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned, and so forth (25:31-46), while still others assert just as strenuously that works will not get us into Heaven. It got pretty juicy back in 2016, when CNN published a quiz to determine if you and I worship a “Blue-State Jesus” or a “Red-State Jesus.” The Blue-State Jesus, CNN concluded, required good works: feeding, clothing, caring for, and the like. The Red-State Jesus demanded nothing but faith. Most of us, I suspect, fall more into one camp than into the other.

The first letter of John sheds a lot of light on this debate when it says, “This is His commandment, that we should believe in the Name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He commanded us” (3:23). A single commandment requires that we believe and that we love, where the word John uses here is *αγαπη* (*agape*), which is a love that expresses itself not by feeling, but by doing. In what I admit is a really weird metaphor, this commandment makes me think of a bipod support mount for hunting and tactical rifles. The weapon rests on two legs; remove one of them, and you’re in big trouble. Argue about which of the two legs is more essential for the rifle’s performance and you’ll lose every time. You have to have both, all the time.

It makes perfect sense for the letter of John to insist on both, because John’s Gospel tells us so famously that “whoever believes in Him shall not die but shall have eternal life” (3:16) and also commands us to love one another just as Jesus loves us. In another admittedly weird metaphor, you can’t swing a dead cat anywhere inside John’s Gospel without hitting both commands to believe and to love. Still, it may sound like we do one or the other, depending on the day and our mood: some days faith shows up, and some days we do good works. That’s the problem with setting up an either/or, with trying to define a “Red-State Jesus” or “Blue-State Jesus.” They’re not exclusive, they’re mutually dependent on one another.

We are able to love another because we believe with all our heart that God loves us, that Jesus loves us to the point of dying on a Cross for us. Believing that we are so loved, trusting the One Who “has the power to lay down His life and the power to take it up again” (John 10:17) gives us the will and the power to share that love with one another, often in the form of doing good for one another.

But, some will argue, we aren’t always capable of doing good for one another, or even of loving one another as God loves us. I agree. It can be very tough. More often than not, however, we fail to do good for one another not because we don’t love them, but because we don’t have enough time. Or enough money, or enough skill, or enough of whatever that other person may need from us. The very phrase “not enough” suggests a scarcity of resources that is antithetical to a true faith in God. There is no such thing as “not enough” in God’s world, whether it’s loaves, fishes, compassion, or strength. What’s missing is our own faith that God gives us enough, that God provides each day our daily bread.

Today’s readings challenge us to consider how deeply we believe in the power of God in our lives and how willing we are to spread around some of that power, which is expressed in love.