

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 29, 2007 –

Text: John 10:22-30

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“ Not on the Way ”

Parents and children arguing. Co-workers in disagreement. Churches quarreling with each other. Nations threatening each other. Nothing is sadder than conflict among people. Yet, it is a mark of our maturity to realize that conflict can often be that the two protagonists are not ready to hear each other and may never be. They simply are not on the same path of life.

Such was the case when Truman met Stalin. At the Potsdam Conference Truman wrote in his diary that he and Stalin would only need to sit down man to man and talk through the world's problems. Stalin wrote that Truman was naïve and a lightweight. Stalin knew that there could be no ultimate resolution of their conflicts -because Stalin was walking a different path in life -that of conquering the whole world. Truman would learn this all too well through Korea and into the Cold War.

In the Gospel reading for this morning we have another very tragic example of a failure in communication that will end in Jesus' death who yet will begin again. The Judeans, gathering around Jesus, push him to stop irritating them and declare that he is their Messiah. They had heard his preaching of a new relationship to God, of his miracles and healings. And now he walks through the Temple precincts during Chanukah, the festival which celebrates past victories of the Jewish struggle over their enemies. So suggestive Jesus' presence was, they ask him, "How long will you keep us irritated? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

There is always tension when people, who are walking very different paths in life, come upon each other. These Judeans cannot hear Jesus because they have not learned how to listen. There is no such thing, in this kind of context, of "telling us plainly." There are those arguments you have with others when they are not ready or able to hear you. Or, as time may later teach you, perhaps *you were not ready to hear them*. And when you try "to speak plainly" in these situations, the argument only gets more heated. Why? Because you are walking different paths through life.

Jesus is showing us this morning that sometimes it is very difficult to communicate his good news. The Judeans were not ready. Their path may have crossed Jesus' way that winter day, but because they were not walking life in the same direction, communication failed. Parents may understand this with their children, professors with their students and pastors with the people they care for. The tragic failure of such communication in families leads to much hurt. In churches much the same pain. To nations it can lead to social conflict and war. When nations, such as China and the United States, are walking different paths to human glory, only great efforts at diplomacy can sometimes prevent the tragedies that deep misunderstanding and mistrust bring.

The Judeans want to establish a kingdom by very violent force against their overlords. This is not Jesus' deep path in life. Their paths intersect in the Temple when they beg Jesus to "tell us plainly." Jesus replies, "I have told you, and you do not believe.... My sheep hear my voice and they follow me." What Jesus is saying is that the Judeans in question are on such a path, a violent path in life, that they will

never hear what he says. Unless they penetrate the meaning of the word "sheep." ...Not heard!

The early disciples pondered and prayed about the greatest communication failure of them all – Jesus' crucifixion. As they searched their Hebrew Bible, they came across the words of Isaiah,

"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.

Like a lamb. The lamb that was slain. Here God gave them a key, a figure, an icon, a doorway to seeing more deeply the meaning to Jesus' death. "*Arnos*" is the Greek word for lamb. But the Spirit takes them more deeply. "*Arnios*," not "*arnos*" is the word they use to proclaim the meaning of the death of Jesus. "*Arnios*" is the diminutive of "*arnos*" and means little lamb, baby lamb, lambkins. And with this figure of a baby lamb, a vulnerable little lamb, the first Christians are given a powerful tool to communicate Jesus' new relationship to God. At last they had good news.

By learning to live the paradoxes of the lamb you begin the find and walk Jesus' way: your greatest power comes from lamblike vulnerability of openness to others; praying for your enemies rather than joining in their war games; your greatest wealth comes from embracing the poverty of sharing all that you have; your greatest freedom is in being servant of all; serving each other makes you the first among your fellow disciples. This is no soldier's war for human glory. Oh Iraq!

People did walk this path of Jesus the lambkin. Dorcas, in the first reading, "was devoted to good works and acts of charity." The Judean men had no interest in that –they wanted glory, the seduction of violence. Jesus' path through life is also shown in the 23rd Psalm: his sheep lie down in green pastures and are led beside still waters. But those Judeans want action, the war games, the camaraderie of violent men and women at war! Oh Iraq!

When this new way of peace and caring is put through "the great ordeal" of the butchery of Roman persecution because this Way of Jesus becomes a threat to an Empire –the little lambs of Jesus endure and pray for their persecutors. Do you really think those Judeans would have stood by so passively? They were young! They wanted a fight for power and glory! A different path indeed!

In our time we know the path of Jesus' life embraces people of many sexual identities. By following the lead of the great little lamb; by venturing into the lions' dens of the churchly powerful through Lutherans Concerned, by risking and being savaged by the lions of the church as some have suffered, even died; by daring to become as vulnerable as little lambkins in coming out publicly such as in the ECP; by praying in lamblike spirit for those who hate us, and in binding up the wounded lambs and feeding them through LLGM, the Great Lamb that was slain shall be victorious. And that love-victory will send the lions out of the church and bring the people of God back together again, stronger, humbler, and empowered by love.

And so it is possible that death brings life, that a little lamb conquers the lion by love, that the baby in Mary's arms is the center of the universe. It is possible to receive the wafer and the wine and therein to see the risen Christ is always amongst us. A little lamb shall lead us in peace, forgiveness and love. Follow that way! Follow that way! Amen

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