

Easter 4, April 25, 2021 (Jn 10:11-18; Acts 4:5-12; 1 Jn 3:16-24) SERMON

The holy gospel according to John, the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter (10:11-18). **Glory to you, O Lord.**

Jesus said to his disciples and some of the Pharisees, **I AM the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he see the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I AM the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life, only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I receive from my Father.** This is the gospel of our Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

There are two teaching points in this gospel text. Teaching is appropriate on this Confirmation day, since our confirmands have just finished the “teaching” of the meaning of our faith. First, when a phrase is repeated several times, we need to pay attention to it. Five times in these eight verses Jesus talks about *laying down his life* as a voluntary act done out of love. That love was fulfilled just three weeks ago on Easter, when God raised his one and only Son from death to eternal life, opening the way for *us* to follow when we leave this earth.

Second, when Jesus says **I AM**, which in Greek is *ego eimi*, his Jewish listeners hear him equating himself with God. Way back in Exodus, some 1500 years before the birth of Christ, God identified himself to Moses with the same words: *ego eimi*. Of course, that was originally written in Hebrew, a language that doesn’t translate well into either Greek or English.

What we call the *Old Testament* was translated into Greek around 250 years before Christ, after Alexander the Great conquered practically the entire known world and Greek became the language of all the people. It’s a wonderful story: 72 rabbis were isolated on an island in 72 huts with caregivers to meet their every need. They worked diligently to translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. And behold, one day all 72 emerged from their huts with their translations complete, and all 72 were identical—truly a miracle from God! This Greek translation is called the *Septuagint*, meaning “72.”

The Hebrew version of *ego eimi* sounds like *yichvay*. It has the meaning of *being* with no tense, no time. It can be translated as *I am*, or *I will be*, or *I have been*. No matter how it's translated, it's literally "God-talk," and no one has the right to identify himself with God that closely. That was highly offensive to the Pharisees, the scribes, and the elders—all those who clung tightly to their own interpretation of the Law of Moses.

So every time Jesus said I AM, they got upset all over again. These I AM statements of Jesus are among our most beloved scriptures: I AM the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate for the sheep; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, and the truth, and the life; the vine; the Alpha and the Omega.

That name of God, *yichvay*—or *YHVH*—is so holy to the Jews that it's never pronounced, never spoken. It's so holy that when they read the scriptures aloud, they say *Adonai*, which also means *Lord*.

Today we celebrate Confirmation—the *Affirmation of Baptism*—for three (two) of our young people. They affirmed for themselves the baptismal vows made for them some fifteen years ago by parents and sponsors; and our congregation has been increased by three (two) voting members.

As voting members, they'll be eligible to attend next year's Synod Assembly—a gathering of delegates from the 200 congregations of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin.

This year's assembly was held virtually last week. The theme was "Justice & Joy." That's a perfect tie-in with words you just heard as part of the Confirmation service. Right after the Apostle's Creed I asked the confirmands these questions:

**Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism:**

- **To live among God's faithful people,**
- **To hear his Word and share in his supper,**
- **To proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,**
- **To serve all people, following the example of our Lord Jesus,**
- **And to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?**

*Justice & Joy.* The theme verse of the Assembly was Proverbs 21:15: **When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous.** Every time Bishop Laurie said, “When justice is done,” we all responded, “it is a joy to the righteous.” We said that a *lot* during the conference!

Here are some other lines that were repeated over and over:

- “Always remember, justice is what love looks like in public” (Dr. Cornel West).
- “Working for justice and peace is at the very core of our Lutheran faith” (Bishop Laurie).
- “In our Lutheran faith, justice is as basic as baptism, and as central as confirmation” (Bishop Laurie).

As our confirmands stated their intention to “strive for justice and peace in all the earth,” we too, adults in the faith, are called to examine *our* intentions regarding the place of faith in our lives.

Our reading from 1 John explains it this way: **This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If you have material possessions and see your brother or sister in need but have no pity, how can the love of God be in you? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth (3:16-18).**

Our “good works” are done with joy and thanksgiving because Jesus, in dying, gave up his human life so we could participate in his divine life. He opened the way of salvation for us and for all who believe in him—and for all who even *want* to believe in him.

It’s this *joy* I’ve tried to impart to our confirmands. Even though they’re now considered “adult voting members” of the congregation, their faith is still immature and pretty much uninformed. But between their Sunday School classes and confirmation training they’ve been exposed to the Bible as God’s Word, and to Jesus, who is the very Word of God. And I truly believe that as they grow in years they’ll come back to this “basic training,” this “boot camp” of the faith they’ve grown up with.

Faith isn’t static. Martin Luther called it a “mighty, active, growing, living thing.” And if our kids have that—if *we* have that—I believe it’s good enough for now. They know where to turn when they need Jesus. – Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed, Alleluia!**