

**The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the
Fourth Sunday of Easter**



Year A
RCL

1 Peter 2:19-25
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10

The Collect

The Collect

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

Psalm 23

Dominus regit me

- 1 the LORD is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those
who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

1 Peter 2:19-25

It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of

your souls.

John 10:1-10

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and

will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

SERMON

I've been, this past week, much troubled by the differences I perceive between Jesus' words and the things I wind up doing. Not to put too fine a point on it, there seems to be an awful gulf between Jesus' teachings and what my experience tells me about the world. I'm hoping that maybe if I tell you where I'm having trouble, one of you will help me over this hump, because, frankly, I'm stumped.

In the passage we read from 1 Peter, we are told not to retaliate:

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

But, I learned from my first wedgie in grade school

that in this world, might pretty much makes right and the kid who won't defend himself will likely wind up with a swirly and a black eye. My experience in life tells me one thing; Scripture tells me another. In Leviticus, God tells his people:

I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.¹

and

You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.²

The writer of 1 Peter insists:

“Be holy, because I am holy.”

The Bible is crammed with the advice that I am not to return hurt for hurt, that when I am abused, I am not to return abuse, but my experience tells me that unless I impose consequences upon the bad actions of others, I

1 Leviticus 11:44 New International Version (NIV)

2 Leviticus 20:26 NIV

will continually suffer swirlies and black eyes.

And what about the disadvantaged? How am I to respond to the need represented by the panhandlers on Winchester Avenue? My experience tells me that if I give them money, I might be enabling behavior which ultimately will harm them, yet I am also taught in our passage from Acts:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

But, that's Communism, our sworn enemy! That can't be right, can it? That's why I need your help! I'm doing my best to do what I read in the Bible, but my earthly experience teaches that so much of it clearly won't work. What am I supposed to do? I pray the Lord's Prayer with you every Sunday, (with Vivie's help). I return thanks before I eat, I study the Scriptures and read

difficult books. What else am I supposed to do? Be a floor mat and let people walk all over me? Become a Communist? What am I supposed to do to accommodate the high-sounding advice in the Bible to the realities of life in the 21st Century?

The Bible tells me:

“It is better to trust in the Lord
Than to put trust in man.
It is better to trust in the Lord
Than to put confidence in princes.”³

But my experience teaches me otherwise. Every day, for 27 years, I strapped on a pistol and went to work. I couldn't trust the bad guys to ascribe to Jesus' teachings, could I? But my words said one thing; my actions said another. I was simultaneously saying to the world, “I love you because that is my faith, but if you cross me I'll blow your head off.” That's a hypocritical position.

³ Psalm 116:8-9 [NKJV]

CNN reported that Pope Francis had some thoughts about this:

“It is a scandal to say one thing and do another. That is a double life. There are those who say, ‘I am very Catholic, I always go to mass, I belong to this and that association. He said some of these people should also say “my life is not Christian, I don’t pay my employees proper salaries, I exploit people, I do dirty business, I launder money, [I lead] a double life’.”

“There are many Catholics who are like this and they cause scandal,” he said. “How many times have we all heard people say ‘if that person is a Catholic, it is better to be an atheist’.”

Can you believe that? The Pope thinks it is better to be an atheist than to be a scandalous Christian. If my actions don’t reflect the teachings of my faith, I become a scandal, and if I am a scandal, I will lead others away from the truth. A hypocritical Christian can do more

damage than Rome ever did. CNN asked:

If you believe but don't behave, can you get into heaven? No, the Pope suggested, in characteristically blunt language.

He imagined a wealthy Christian knocking at the gates of heaven and saying, "Here I am, Lord! ... I went to Church, I was close to you, I belong to this association, I did this... Don't you remember all the offerings I made?"

To which Jesus may reply, according to the Pope: "Yes, I remember. The offerings, I remember them: All dirty. All stolen from the poor. I don't know you." That will be Jesus' response to these scandalous people who live a double life."

The scandalous Christian, the hypocritical Christian, is the one Jesus spoke of when He said:

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit."

That's where I am, church. That's what hurts my soul

– that I cannot believe that acting as Jesus did will “work”. I can’t believe that unless I impose at least the threat of consequences to potential villains thinking of harming or stealing from me, the bad guys will do just that! I just.....

Holy mackerel! I just had one of those “Ah HAH” moments! What does calling myself a Christian mean if it doesn’t mean that I choose to trust Jesus’ teaching more than I value my own experience? I’ve been blind!

Some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard this, and they asked Him, “Are we blind too?”
“If you were blind, Jesus replied, “you would not be guilty of sin. But since you claim you can see,’ your guilt remains.”

Claiming the name of Christ while still being OK with offering violence to another is a scandal! Focusing only on what is good for me, I have completely lost sight of what I am called to do – be my brother’s aid

and solace – and embraced the role of a thief and a bandit! And now, I remember something else the Pope said:

“I believe that the church not only should apologize to the person who is gay whom it has offended, but has to apologize to the poor, to exploited women, to children exploited for labor; it has to ask forgiveness for having blessed many weapons.”

How much time have I spent working out the strategies I would employ to take down an imagined bad guy who hypothetically threatens me or my family? More deeply, who is this bad guy I am preparing myself to face down? Has he a face? A mother? Is he real, or just something I imagined when I felt insecure? Every story I have heard from infancy onward had a villain, so I think my life story must have one. All of us think that, and if we can't find one, we will even invent one out of desperation so we can imagine killing them. What

hypocrisy! What a scandal! Better not to call yourself “Christian” while holding these ideas, lest you lead others astray! Speak with one voice, church, walk the talk, or do not speak at all of your faith.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

In His infinite mercy, God, says to humanity, “Come, let us talk it over: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” The mercy of the Lord goes out to meet those who dare to argue with Him about the things one does or does not do and who accept, with humility, the verdict of such an argument. Baptism does not mean dunk and done. It is, rather, a commitment to live your life in constant engagement with the Creator in everything you do, weighing everything you do in the scales of God’s commandments. Take up God’s offer, church, when He says, “Come, let us talk it over.”

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give
you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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