

Ann E. Murray
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St. Michael's Episcopal Church
4th Sunday After Easter, Year A

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

“But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval.”

How appropriate that we have these verses from First Peter in today's reading for we are in the midst of great suffering at this time and we are enduring. And, by doing so, we have God's approval.

What a blessing and comfort that is on this Good Shepherd Sunday. And, if our only suffering is that we meet through YouTube videos or on Zoom chat meetings, then we are able to do this. We all know there are many who have suffered much more from this pandemic—those who have lost their lives or the lives of their loved ones. Our suffering is little compared to their great losses. Please keep in your prayers those who have gone on to God's great glory and their families and loved ones. The good news is that we are not in this alone. Christ, our good shepherd is with us through this all and has gone through so much more than we will ever endure.

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus tells us he is our Good Shepherd and he knows us. Shepherds are very important to sheep herds. Let's be honest, sheep are not the brightest mammals on the earth and need to be watched and cared for. It is no coincidence that Jesus likens us to his sheep. It is easy for us to go astray and get lost. Thankfully, our shepherd is always with us, knows us by name and calls us to follow him.

What does Jesus want us to do when we follow him? Jesus wants us to do his will which he gave to us in the great commandments which are to Love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Unfortunately, those seem to be three of the most difficult things for us to do.

How do we love God? Well, as it says in the Gospel of Mark we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Easy peasy, right? We will come back to this one.

How are we to love our neighbor? We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I must admit that I for a time in my life I would say it was much easier for me to love my neighbor than to love myself. After all, I am acutely aware of all my flaws and reasons not to be loved. However, as I matured, I realized that if I did not love myself first then I could not love anyone else.

How do we love ourselves? We love ourselves by living in authenticity and truth—by becoming all that God created us to be, by accepting ourselves for who we are and accepting the transformation that we have received by being heirs of Christ.

Brene Brown, author of *Dare to Lead*, defines authenticity as “the daily practice of **letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are**”. Authenticity is about letting go of who we think others want us to be and embracing who God made us to be--our passions, gifts, talents, and even our weaknesses and things we do not like about ourselves.

How do we do this? As Christians, I believe we do this by relying on God working in us. As Psalm 23 states, our shepherd is with us always even as we walk through the darkest valley, we shall not fear evil, we are comforted by the shepherd's rod and staff. It is only in letting go of our will, relying on our Shepherd's rod and staff, and living into the will of God that we can truly love ourselves and live out God's purpose for our lives.

It is important to pray as often as possible to God for the knowledge and strength to do God's will on earth, for gratitude and thanksgiving. Doing these things are a step in living an authentic Christian life. Going to church even by zoom or like us through YouTube, partaking in communion—whether in real life or a spiritual communion that we have come to share during this pandemic time and being part of a Christian community are also things that help us discern the will of God in our lives. During these months, we have learned new and differing ways to be in community with each other and I am blessed and thankful for these times.

Once we love ourselves and live in authenticity, we can then truly love our neighbors. When I met with Father Jason before coming to St. Michael's, he told me that St. Michael's is a church that feeds people—literally and figuratively and I have seen that myself. St. Michael's is an outward looking and mission oriented church who takes our vows in the Baptismal covenant very seriously—we strive daily to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves and we work for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

What else does loving our neighbor mean? It means that we welcome asylum seekers and provide them with protection from the deadly and destructive countries from which they flee. It means that we work to end homelessness. It means that we work to provide health care and mental health care for those most in need of it. It means that we truly stretch ourselves and reach out to those among us in need—whether they live next door or across the world. We care for those who are in desperate economic situations, those living in war zones, those who are victims of famine, victims of oppression, victims of violence, victims of injustice, and the homeless and migrants of the world. And, right now, it means staying at home, honoring social distancing and wearing masks when we are in public.

I know I've gone from preaching and am into meddling but these are the things we have agreed to at our Baptism and which we are held to live out in our lives.

Then, and only then, are we able to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The Good Shepherd shows us today what we need to do to show our love for God. We are to follow him, as sheep follow the Good Shepherd. We are to listen to God's voice because we know it and we know God and God will lead us next to the still waters and grant us rest in green pastures. God wants to lead us and comfort us. God wants us to follow Jesus' lead and endure suffering for what is right. Jesus, who though he is God, left his heavenly place and came to earth to lead, teach, love and die for us. It is up to us to make sure we are following him and doing his will.

Therefore, I leave you with the charge to love and serve God by loving your neighbor as yourself. Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen.