

Easter 4 – May 3, 2020 Good Shepherd Sunday
Text: Acts 2:42-47
Theme: Welcome to the Commune

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles gives us a picture of worship in the early days of the Church. It almost sounds like a commune doesn't it? The people sold all their stuff and had everything in common. When we think of a commune, perhaps we think of a cult or a bunch of irresponsible teenagers living together. The idea of a commune has suffered some violence since the many failed attempts at communal living. I found it pretty entertaining growing up in the Northwest and watching all the communes spring up in the 1960's and quickly die off when hippies' parents quit supporting them. It's fun to be a socialist when there is a capitalist who is responsible for your financial needs. However, when that capitalist funding dries up, and you find yourself standing in line at the food pantry or the free clinic, life is not nearly so much fun.

Yet, before the hippies of the 1960's and the religious cults of the 1970's and 80's co-opted the term, a commune was often a Christian practice. A commune, in the Acts of the Apostles, was a group of Christians with similar theological understandings and values who wanted to dwell together in a Christian community. It made sense, particularly for Christians who were living under

persecution. In Biblical times, there were no public schools so your kids were educated at home. So, banding together, Christians, who were functioning illegally until the 4th century, could get their children educated about the Way without being martyred. Also, since worship was illegal, living together made it possible for everyone to sneak into someone's house in the middle of the night and very quietly conduct the liturgy. This is the picture that is painted for us in the first reading for today.

We suffer in today's Church with an overage of privacy and secrecy. We hide our troubles from one another because we don't want to be a burden to anyone else. We think if anyone knew of our sin, they would shun us or think less of us. We even hide our illnesses as though by pretending not to be ill, we will be fine or as though being ill makes us a less valuable person. This is all ridiculous. Jesus is clear in the Gospel for today. He is the Good Shepherd and we are the sheep. We are not individuals who have done so well for ourselves that we have gained admittance to the sheep club. We are not such fine specimens of humanity that Jesus begged us to join his fold. We were dirty, stinky, nasty, dying sheep who Jesus, the Good Shepherd, rescued from eternal death, washed in baptismal waters, fed with his own body and blood and placed in his pen.

Now we all got here the same way. None of us earned it. None of us bought our way in. Every single one of us was rescued by the Good Shepherd, and whatever we have in this life, we were given it by him. So why would we live like this is a club to which we belong and pay dues? It is not! This is the sheep pen into which Jesus placed you. Look around you. Like it or not, this is your family. Not your family for today or while you're at church or even while you are on earth but this is your family forever! These are the ones to whom you turn for support, encouragement, accountability – everything you need. Jesus is the Good Shepherd but he put us together in this pen for a reason. We need support. Lone sheep do not fare well in this world. They tend to get their throats ripped out by wolves.

While I'm not necessarily suggesting that we buy 50 acres and move to the farm together, I am saying that we are intended by God to be communal, not separate. This life is too difficult for us to have to try to go it alone. When God created the world, everything was good except that Adam was alone. He created Eve to be with Adam because human beings are created to live in communion with one another. You are a part of the pen and nothing you do can change that short of rejecting Jesus, Good Shepherd.

We are not called to judge one another but to love, support and encourage one another. All of us were rescued by the Good Shepherd, and all of us need one another to survive this world until we are welcomed into our eternal home where all the sin and sorrow will be gone and there will be nothing left but joy with our Good Shepherd.

Remember folks that this applies to our brothers and sisters who are not physically sitting next to us as well. How we treat the other sheep in the pen matters, because we are all family. It is pure sin, violation of the 1st, 5th and 8th commandments at the least for us to spout hateful rhetoric on social media about ANYONE. I am appalled by the things I see written by people who I know to be Christians! This sheep pen is for everybody, including Nancy Pelosi and Donald Trump and J. B. Pritzker! Just because they are more public faces does not make it okay to be mean and hateful towards them. Why would we do that? These are the leaders God has given us while we are here in the sheep pen. While we certainly do not agree with everything any of our leaders decide all the time, two things apply always. If they are part of the pen, they are our brothers and sisters and we love and support them no matter what. If they are not part of the pen we treat them with love and compassion because no one was ever won for Christ by treating

them like they are scum. I point out the horrid stuff I see on social media because it is an obvious example. But this applies to the way we treat all of our brothers and sisters. Either they are family or they are outside the family and need to be brought in. Either way, we have an obligation of love towards them.

So get over your pride and self-aggrandizement. Communal living is founded in knowing that we are no better than anyone else. If we have something positive, constructive and helpful to say, that's great. Say it! If it is something negative, say it privately only to the one who needs to hear it. Think before you post, write, tweet or run your mouth. If it is sinful, stop yourself with the power of your baptism and repent. Get over yourself and rejoice in the family God has given you, the whole family, not just the ones you happen to like best. God has given you the sheep pen so that you will never be alone. God has surrounded you with the whole body of Christ, not just the parts you happen to like. A knobby knee-cap is not sexy, but try walking without a knee. Christ has paid the price for your eternal salvation and has surrounded you with his body, fellow believers to strengthen and love you until the day you enter paradise. Welcome to the commune! Rejoice and be glad.