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5.6.17 Homily

Fourth Sabbath of Easter

Acts 2:14a,36-41; Ps 23:1-6; 1 Pet 2:20-25; John 10:1-10

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Being (I think) as familiar as anyone in this room is with the vocation of sheep herding, I am *as usual* going to lead you off the beaten path and onto the road less traveled by! Here's the scene, as has been presented by scriptural exegetes.

Sheep roamed the hills of Jerusalem and all surrounding areas by the thousands. Those that were being groomed, predominantly for ritual slaughter, were led out into the grazing areas during the daytime, and often the hills were covered with intermingling herds. When day was done, shepherds would lead their flocks back down the hills and into places of rest. The sheep would follow the voice of their respective shepherd, obediently separating themselves out of the larger herd and into their proper dismissal lines like good little girls and boys.

And here's where it gets really interesting. Because there were no typical American-style farms. There were no corrals or fenced-in areas dotting the landscape. And no sheep dogs either, to corral those stupid bundles of wool through some non-existent opening that would magically fence them in and protect them from more aggressive animals or greedy shepherds. The hillsides were dotted with little individual herds, each herd with a shepherd whose voice they recognized. And the shepherd lay down with them. And the *shepherd* was the *gate* beyond which they would not wander.

Because, you see, sheep are rather imprudent, docile, blind to their surroundings. They seemingly do not recognize people and places by sight, but apparently are gifted with very discriminating ears. They'll go anywhere they are led, so long as they recognize their leader's voice. They will not follow someone else's shepherd. If they *weren't* dumb sheep, we might call them *complicit*.

Sound like anybody *you* know? *Maybe even somebody you **have been***?

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we do *not* hear Jesus call explicitly himself the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Instead, we hear him say this: **"As God is my witness, I am that gate for the sheep."** And this is what we tend to overlook in our focus on sheep and shepherds: that Jesus *is* the gate; that shepherd and gate are *one*; and that the sheep-gate-shepherd absolutely *did* lay down, *which often led to losing one's life for one's sheep*. Pretty awful profession, wouldn't you say? Surely not one kid's imagine for themselves as youngsters!

Oh, and don't forget that shepherds were looked down on by the fine professional folks of the day too. They were the uneducated and unbathed rabble, *definitely **unwelcome*** in the Temple, in the civil courts, and in the homes of good up-standing Jews and Romans.

Which reminds us of David, the shepherd-king composer who is purported to have given us a legacy of psalms; and a direct line of descendancy to our royal heritage as well. And to the psalm that *everybody* knows, whether Jew, Christian, Muslim, or none of the above. Of course, in David's day shepherds were prevalent. The people were nomads, their herds were their livelihood. Literally. David's genius was his ability to identify God as the shepherd *par excellence*, the be-all and end-all model for shepherds of all kinds – whether of woolly flocks or of mighty empires. The one who is our gate, our going out and our coming in; the one who lays down life itself for the sake of the others.

The exalted prose of David's psalms became the model – the definition of an ideal leader. The example of David's life, unfortunately, also does, as we are privy to his excesses. Privy to what power can so easily seduce good people into. Like the story of the Jews themselves, both then and now. Or heads of state. Or princes of the church. Even the "Lost Boys" of Sudan, whose story we watched last evening at our First Friday gathering, are now the ones who are the controlling power over that nation's current blood baths.

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When we lose our humanity, we lose our way. That is the lesson of the cross, the real perfect example of a Good Shepherd. Who lays down his or her life for the others. Like Memere, last night's "chief." Like David, ultimately. *Certainly* like Jesus, who was so fully grounded in his truth that he never lost sight of his humanity. The heroic act of dying, denied to so many, is the ultimate lesson in living.

Our vocations are called pastoral for a reason: they all are rooted in green pastures. And we all are called to lead with open-hearted integrity, not to follow with blind-eyed complicity. May we be the going out and the coming in of goodness and mercy all the days of our lives.

Happy Vocations Day, Shepherds!

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5.13.17 Homily

Fifth Sabbath of Easter

Acts 6:1-7; Ps 33:1-2,4-5,18-19; 1 Pet 2:4-9; John 14:1-12

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Catie and I were discussing today's gospel earlier this week. I wondered what she might think of it, given that it is so popular ... with so many ... for funerals. But I didn't bring it up. She did. "What are the readings this week?" she asked. And when I told her, she *immediately* said, "I don't believe Jesus is the only way to God."

Whew!

And I don't believe we're living this life for the sole purpose of moving on to some mansion in the sky where we each will have our own private dwelling. This smacks of segregation to me, and maybe even red-lining of districts. Maybe the rich on earth will be poor in heaven and vice versa ... the old comeuppance story that runs so prevalently throughout the Bible.

And yet ... this gospel has been immensely comforting to many hurting people throughout the ages. It has given them hope for something better, for a reward they never seemed to get in this world no matter how hard they worked.

But why do we expect reward for what we do anyway? And why are we so fixated on "reward" working both ways?: we're rewarded with *good* for the *good* we do; with *bad* for the *bad* we do. Everything is ultimately contingent upon somebody *else's* judgment of how *we* live our lives. *Even* – and *especially* – if that somebody else is God.

So how do we reinterpret today's gospel for this 21st century?

Let us share our wisdom.

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5.20.17 Homily

6th Sabbath of Easter

Acts 8:5-8,14-17; Ps 66:1-7,16-20; 1 Pet 3:15-18; John 14:15-21

Elsie Hainz McGrath

Today Jesus promises us access to hidden spiritual wisdom that dwells within and among, translated in our gospel as “another advocate, an authentic spirit.” This privileged access apparently comes only as a result of obeying Jesus’ instructions, which is to say that without the proper disposition to receive these graces our ears are deaf and our eyes are blind *to the truth of their eternal presence.*

Jesus was not handing us an amended version of stone tablets, but a *renewed* way of living – life *in* the Spirit. All we had to do was follow his lead, eyes and ears open to the world in all its fullness, hearts and hands and voices following suit. And – in a quick nod to last week’s gospel lesson – to follow the way of Jesus is *not* to exclude all *other* ways, but simply to own that it is *one very authentic way* to wholeness and the peace which surpasses all human understanding.

Our psalm so beautifully exemplifies this, because *before* there was Jesus there were *others* who faithfully modeled the way and put voice to their absolute surety of an enduring spiritual presence within and among us. So our translator says: *Come and see what the Beloved has done... Come and hear what the Beloved has done... We who choose to listen and learn sing songs of gratitude and joy.*

And, lo and behold, the “acts of the apostles” proclaims the works of Philip – presumably “ordained a deacon” just last week, which was described, you will recall, as the servant who feeds the poor and looks after the needy so that the presumably “ordained priests” could preach and proselytize. But here he is, this week, in Samaria – that city which probably had remained in-bad-standing among faithful Jews even *after* Jesus had his encounter with the reviled woman at the well. And Philip does what Jesus did: preaches, performs miracles, effects healings. So much for a “hierarchy of ministries” in the early church! Philip apparently even baptized those so-called heathens, which is perhaps why *nowadays* the hierarchy “allows” deacons to both preach and baptize.

But introducing the Holy Spirit into the mix? Nah. Needed Peter and John for that part! As if that Spirit of Truth and Light had not already been there, even without Philip. Or Jesus, for that matter! But then, as now, *hidden* to many.

The so-called Letters of Peter are thought to have been written sometime between the years 70-90. The audience were Christians in Asia Minor who had been earlier converted from Paganism by the Apostle Paul or his disciples. And we know that the Gospel of John was not written until *after* the Letters of Peter, possibly as much as 10-20 years after. So by the time of the writings we falsely attribute to Peter, Jesus had clearly become, for the fledgling church, the absolute “way and truth and light” that we purportedly heard him call himself in last week’s gospel. This is a natural progression, as it were, of early Christian thought, confused and confusing because we have not arranged our Book of Scriptures in the chronological order of their creation.

But we know, as Cynthia Bourgealt (bor-jalt) says: *All progression, or forward motion through time, operates under the Law of Three: the impasse between two opposing forces is mediated by a third force that causes a new creative arising to emerge. But it’s not the triad of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, because the “third force” is always an equal player (not a combination of the first two oppositional energies). There is no progression apart from the Law of Three and no Law of Three apart from progression.*

In my own more recent ponderings on eternal “mysteries” of faith, I think what we are finding is so startling that it pretty literally scares away all but the most *childlike* among us. Because only the most childlike among us has eyes to see and ears to hear that “authentic spirit” which not only *will be* with us forever but already *has been* with us forever – or, as Bourgealt puts it, that “third force” who causes new creative arising to emerge.

Oh, and the second force? That is not one person who lived 2,000 years ago, was executed by the state, and was believed to have been risen by a handful of disciples. It is each of us and all of us, destined to work and to play in cooperation with our ultimate Origin and causing “a new creative arising” through *our* “renewed way of life.”

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