

Easter 4C
April 25, 2010

St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's

Acts 9.36-43
Ps 23
Revelation 7.9-17
John 10.22-30

Karl Barth was a Swiss theologian often held to be one of the most important Christian thinkers of the 20th century. He is also the densest of all the theologians I ever tried, and failed, to successfully read. Here's a little something he wrote about the resurrection in his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans:

The Resurrection is the emergence of the necessity of giving glory to God: the reckoning with what is unknown and unobservable in Jesus, the recognition of Him as Paradox, Victor and Primal History.

We could probably spend some time with that one and parse it out to make some sense, but just about everything in what is called his opus of 13 books titled Dogmatics makes your head hurt. But one quote often used goes something like this:

Sermons should be written with the Bible in one hand and the New York Times in the other.

That makes sense to me. Make sermons relevant by connecting what is happening around us to the scripture. And in church I guess that means the readings for the day.

This week in the news we learned about Forbes Magazine's "Fictional 15." These are the 15 richest fictional characters and include some you would expect like Richie Rich, Scrooge McDuck, and Jed Clampett. But the newcomer to the list and at number one spot this year is Carlisle Cullen, the patriarch of the Cullen vampires in Forks. At age 370 his accumulated fortune is estimated at \$34.1 billion. I don't think that's the one to preach on today; but perhaps another day when we read about mammon!

Not in the New York Times, but very much on my mind this week are the prayers on Facebook, under the guise of humor, for the death of President Obama. I think that's pretty preachable, talking about our culture of fear, impatience, hate and rejection of that which doesn't satisfy us immediately. Or the terrifying immigration bill passed by the Arizona legislature and signed by the governor into law in which not only are undocumented immigrants going to be hunted down, but you can be arrested for being in their presence even for things like driving them to church.... An abomination to Christ's mandate that we welcome, or at least have compassion for, the stranger. I'm not shying away from those topics which are deep and active Christian concerns, but I couldn't figure out how to "plainly" use them to clarify these particular lessons.

Then I heard a story on NPR about the so-called "Trust Hormone." That kept my attention because the scriptures today lean heavily on trust: trust in Peter to continue Jesus' work of healing and that his prophetic ministry did not end when he died; trust that women like Dorcas will be devoted to good works and acts of charity in Christ's name; trust in the nature of God as shepherd who is with us in the dark times and in the presence of evil and enemies; trust that after coming through the Ordeal, there will be no more hunger or thirst or tears; trust that we can hear the voice of the shepherd.

The article on this "trust hormone" started out as an inquiry as to why people distrust government. Now we may not need anyone to tell us plainly why that is, but it was determined that an undersupply of oxytocin, the hormone which among other things makes the uterus contract after childbirth, may play a role. When oxytocin was squirted up the nose of volunteers, they became more willing to give money to strangers and not so convinced that the government was out to get them.

Christians, or any people with firm religious beliefs, may be living with a bit more oxytocin in our systems because believing in things seen and unseen is an intersection of faith and trust. Mary Schertz wrote in Christian Century several years ago that the pastoral scene in the 23rd psalm, lying in green pastures, wandering beside quiet placid lakes and having a need for nothing, begins to look more like radical trust than blind obedience when we realize that there is a darker side to this beloved psalm. She writes that it appears to be a bucolic scene, until we also notice that the paths of righteousness could mean the ways of justice. Or that it talks about walking fearlessly through valleys that are like night, filled with deep shadows. Or that we notice the table spread with abundant food also happens to be surrounded by enemies. These simple sheep get a little more complicated and trust in the shepherd becomes essential.

All tangled up in trust and faith and belief is the confidence that as the sheep of this shepherd we will be able to hear his voice. Just like the Jews, we would like to hear it plainly. In English, if you please. Apparently it's not necessarily going to come in English and Jesus isn't interested in handing those gathered around him any more details; he's already told them and they don't believe based on the works he does, either. Hearing the voice of our shepherd is not always going to be plain.

We live in a world filled with competing voices: buy me, eat me, win me, drive me, wear me. How can we sort out the voice of the Lord and know that it's true? How can we be sure that we're not listening to the enemy? What if the voice of the shepherd is the still, small voice that spoke to Elijah? The Rev. Ken Kesselus has written this week that we Christians must keep our ears tuned to the voice of Jesus, calling out in the midst of those other voices. The challenge is to learn to listen for his voice, putting forward the time and attention to hear when he calls.

That reminds me of our son Andrew's 4th grade class when we moved into a new house mid school year. Mountainview School was "open" with no interior walls or divisions other than some furniture between classrooms. They were located around a central administrative area and library and each class was contiguous and continuous with each other. I thought: How on earth do the students hear the teachers with the other students and teachers right beside them? Interestingly, they had to do it by becoming more quiet. If one teacher had begun to raise a voice to get their students' attention, it would have avalanched. The teachers spoke in normal voices and the

children had to pay attention and listen. They developed the ability to recognize and sort out that voice from the background; sort of like those visual tests where you have to identify the numbers or letters against a contrasting background.

If we belong to this shepherd as his sheep and trust that we can not be snatched away from his hand, we must listen and learn that voice and how to identify it out of the chaos of noise that fills our lives, internal and external. We do that by quieting, not by yelling louder so that the shepherd will speak up! Barbara Brown Taylor has written that if some days you have trouble hearing the voice of your shepherd, be patient with yourself because some days it sounds like a whistle and some days like a cluck; some days like still waters and some days like a curse. Some days we may feel low on that trust hormone and other days our cup runneth over.

So we stick with the flock. Because it is through the flock, the other listeners, that we learn to sort out the shepherd's voice from the background noise and identify those paths of righteousness. Jesus' voice invites and welcomes and offers us a life that is gathered around the throne of God where trouble and danger are not absent, but when all is finally made new, Erik Heen writes that this Christ will guide the weary to the healing waters of life, waters experienced already in the sacrament of baptism, and be nourished by food that satisfies the deepest hunger. As we continue our journey through the Great Fifty Days of Easter our trust is that no matter what the future holds, the shepherd's voice is sure and that God's hand is holding us so that nothing can snatch us away.

Gail Wheatley+