

April 25, 2010

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:22-30

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd John F. Herring, associate rector

If one wanted to go through the bible and think doctrinally, one could find lots of material about the Trinitarian relationship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Gospel according to John has various lines of scripture that seem to point to the ideas found in the creeds. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God... For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." All these come from the Gospel according to John. Certainly, if we want to think through the faith we can find comfort in the Gospel as the source for what we say in the Creeds; If we look at the statements found the New Testament we can feel confident that Jesus is God's son. Our doctrine, our creeds are rooted in scripture. Therefore, many draw the conclusion that John is thinking along doctrinal lines when he includes this passage in his Gospel, which says, "The Father and I are one."

I imagine that when our creeds were in the process of development, this may have been a line that caught the interest of those in the ecumenical councils, as they thought through the Trinitarian relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. However, the Gospel according to John was written well before the ecumenical councils and, at least here, it seems that John is not concerned with doctrine or Trinitarian relationships. Rather, John is getting at the relationship between Jesus and God, as revealed by what Jesus does and is known through the disciples' experience of Jesus, rather than revealed by a particular statement about divine relationships.

Jesus says, "The works I do in my fathers name testify to me." See what I do. Experience what I do. Ultimately, it is through experience that we recognize and are healed by Jesus, rather than through particular statements of faith.

Almighty God, our creator, gave us a world and has a vision for that world, that we shall have abundance, beauty, joy, community & justice, all good things that point to the characteristics of a good creation given by a good Creator. God sent Jesus into the world and Jesus, the Word made flesh, embodied all of these characteristics. Look at the works done by Jesus which point to this. The abundance and community of the Wedding at Cana and the Feeding of the Five Thousand, the justice and joy found in the story of the Woman of Samaria and the beauty in the restoration by Jesus of the sick and the lame. All of these works, before we ever get to the Cross, points to the same goodness found in the Creator. Because our creator is good, made the world for goodness, because Jesus embodied all that goodness in his work, we can see that Jesus and God are one. No specific statement made by Jesus proves this. What Jesus does throughout

the Gospel proves it and then the resurrection of Jesus validates it. Jesus wins no one for the Kingdom by way of doctrinal statements, but rather through his work, in what he does.

It is through the work of the living Christ that we are called to be his Sheep. Somehow, someway, we find ourselves called to be here on Sundays. We experience joy, abundance, beauty, community and justice, all the characteristics of good creation in our life together here on Sundays within the body of Christ. We hear the stories in scripture and we respond, we open ourselves to new possibilities. Once we open ourselves up, the living Christ continually calls us. We are called to be the sheep Christ all of our days, not only on Sunday, called to trust in Jesus in the way sheep learn to trust a shepherd. This trust is not built on any one statement, but on our experience in relationship, the way a pet trusts an owner, a child trusts a parent, a husband trusts his wife, all through experienced relational encounters over time. We find our selves nourished here in community and nourished through daily encounters with the risen one. It is through that nourishment we then can take risks and witness to Christ in what we do, knowing we do not walk alone. It is through our experiences with Christ that we realize we are not only called by what we do, bringing healing, joy and community to others. Bringing love and hope to those in despair.

I was in a hospital a few summers ago as a chaplain and after making rounds, I used to debrief with another chaplain each day, sharing my experiences with him as he would with me. One day he told me that he went up to one of the ICU units and there was a man there, who had no known religious affiliation. He was in his 50's and his condition was most likely terminal. He had tubes going in all over him, he was wearing a breathing mask and spent his days alone, except when a nurse was present. My friend stopped in and asked the nurse, if he was alert and wanting some prayers. "Probably not" said the nurse. "I don't think he has a faith community and he has not been responding to any of us the last couple of days. He has been barely conscious. But you are welcome to try." My friend introduced himself to the man, who then opened his eyes. "Would you like a prayer?" my friend asked. The man slowly nodded his head yes, the nurse looking on, mildly surprised.

As my friend began that prayer, something remarkable happened, the man slowly raised his arm, with tubes and all, up and stretched out his hand reaching for my friend, who then grabbed hold of it and kept praying. The nurse went beyond mild surprise at this point. Her mouth was open and she was crying. This dying man with really nothing to hope for, who had responded to no one over the previous couple of days, responded to a simple prayer and the love that came with it. He did not respond to a statement of faith or a proclamation about Jesus' divinity. He responded to an act of kindness, he stretched out reaching for a prayer rooted in the love and hope of Jesus Christ. The nurse didn't cry at the doctrinal words found in our Creeds; she was moved by an experience rooted in the goodness of God in Christ. The dying and the thriving all can experience the risen Christ, simply by opening up to the Shepherd who works through us.

So it is, 2000 years after the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, almost 2000 years after the Gospel According to John was written, we still encounter these words found in scripture, encouraging us to believe in Jesus, to recognize his oneness with God, because of what Jesus did, and how those works point to the goodness that is found in God. We then respond, first by allowing ourselves to be nourished and cared for as sheep and then by bringing out that nourishment and care into the world as shepherds. The world can know the risen Christ through us all, not so much at first through any particular doctrinal statement we make, but through encounters with the living Christ who enables us to do the work of Christ. We are both sheep and shepherds. We are the sheep who are called to participate in the work of the Shepherd. Our experience in this way of life tells us that Jesus and the Father are one.