

First Congregational Church of Royal Oak
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 08, 2022
Mother's Day

First Reading: Revelation 7:9-17
Gospel: John 10:22-30

Quotes: "*What makes the Gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out, but who it lets in.*" Rachel Held Evans

A Vision of the Church

Recently, I was writing something on my computer and all of a sudden, a colleague of mine came to mind. I said a prayer and tried to get back to work, as I was on a deadline. But the thought of them just wouldn't let me go. So, finally I picked up my phone and dropped them a text – "thinking about you and offering up a prayer". A phone call and an hour discussion later, I realized why God was trying to get my attention.

It reminded me of a time many years ago when a friend of mine called me to say, "I was praying this morning and just couldn't get you off my mind, so I decided to call you." I was having an extremely difficult day for various reasons and the sound of her voice was a welcome refuge. She didn't offer any solutions but most importantly offered me the gift of non-judgmental listening.

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me."

Knowing the voice of the shepherd and hearing it over the cacophony of voices trying to get our attention is **key** in the life of a disciple of Jesus. It is why two-sided prayer is so important – not just what *we* say, but that we also sit quietly in the presence of God to allow God to get a word in edgewise. Most of us are very good at giving God a laundry list of people and events that we want God to take care of; God's marching orders, if you will. But rarely do we sit and listen for a response.

I think it's because we are afraid that God will give us *our* marching orders and call us to something that we really don't want to do. Sheep are like that. They like to wander off and do their own thing. In addition to being sensitive to noise, sheep also don't like to be confined. They want to gather together but will wander off in a heartbeat looking for greener pastures in which to graze. And they are not the smartest animals of the bunch. (And in case you have forgotten, church ... we're the sheep.)

Sheep need a shepherd to keep them safe; to lead them to green pastures and cool waters; to give them a safe place to rest and safe passage through dark valleys. The shepherd is central to the sheep's survival. It is why God must be central in the life of the church; as well as each of us individually as disciples of Jesus. We, the church, need a God who will shepherd us and protect us and wipe every tear from our eyes.

The reading today from Revelation is a vision of *that* church. The people who would have heard John the Elder's letter would have understood that John was giving them a vision of a church

that can be here right now – not just some “pie-in-the-sky” vision that will happen someday when we’re ready. *That* church included everyone – every nation, every tribe, every language – everyone.

They are also all dressed in white. There are no fancy jewels or fine purple linens among them. There is only a group of people who have endured the harsh realities of this world and have been saved by grace. All stand equally before God – redeemed by God’s unending and infinite grace. Think you are better than someone else – for whatever reason? Think again.

And those palm branches? The churches in Asia would have immediately remembered Jesus’ triumphant journey into Jerusalem. Not a triumph of power and might, but a triumph born out of sacrificial love and humility. *That* church knows that even if they stand before the gates of hell that God will ultimately have the last say.

Unfortunately, *that* church, rarely exists in this time and place. Too often church members across denominations and associations are too concerned with their own preferences and long-standing rules and their own comfort. They don’t want *their* church infiltrated by the wrong people. They want a church that looks like them, prays like them, thinks like them, and lives like them. They want a church made in their image instead of God’s.

Churches around the world, including this one, proclaim that “all are welcome”, but few really mean it. What they mean is that “you are welcome here on our terms” and if you are not willing to fit into our box ... then you are free to go. God’s church is a place of radical welcome where all are called and invited to the table of grace no matter who you are or where you are on your journey of faith.

That church, God’s church, lives out agape – sacrificial love. *That* church is centered around Jesus instead of themselves and their history. *That* church praises God – not themselves. *That* church knows that if they live the message of the Gospel, life will be stacked against them, but they live that message anyway. In *that* church, all **means** all.

The quote on today’s bulletin says it perfectly: “*What makes the Gospel offensive isn’t who it keeps out, but who it lets in.*” That observation being made by the late Rachel Held Evans. And if we allow God to be our shepherd, we will be led to become *that* church.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.” *That* church listens for the voice of the shepherd and *that* church knows the shepherd’s voice – as they have learned to listen for it. And *that* church will bring God’s reign to earth here and now – not just when they’re ready.

Amen.