

**The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
April 25, 2010**

Well, here we are again.

Good Shepherd Sunday – The church has long observed one of the Sundays in the Easter season as ‘Good Shepherd Sunday.’ In fact, I believe that we have the 23rd psalm every year and a gospel from the 10th chapter of John --- all with images of shepherds and sheep.

Last year we sang that famous drinking song – ‘...we are poor little lambs who have lost our way...’ I’ll spare you that, this time.

We’ve all heard the expression – “Tell it like it is!”

There is even a song with that title, we looked it up on the Internet --- and in the spirit of ‘telling it like it is,’ it did not help this sermon one bit.

Tell it like it is --- is an admonition to lay it on the line -- get the facts out on the table - pull no punches --- no frills and window dressing --- give me the straight scoop!

A little story: Weary Traveler: “Why in the name of heaven did they build the railway station three miles from the village?”

Disgusted Porter; “They must have thought it would be good to have it near the trains, sir.”

Now that is telling it like it is!

Someone, in an effort to “Tell it like it is” said, “Coming to church does not make you a Christian anymore than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger.”

What got me on to this “Tell it like it is!” kick? I hear it – tell it like it is – loud and clear in today’s gospel.

In the gospel, folks gather around Jesus and ask, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” Tell us plainly, --- “Tell it like it is!”

In today’s gospel we have Jesus responding to the “Tell it like it is” question “If you are the Messiah, tell us...”

With a true, “tell it like it is” answer Jesus says: “...the Father and I are one.”

God and Jesus are of the same substance.

God, out of pure love for us - becomes one of us - a human person --- “the Father and I are one.”

In the Epistle – the Revelation of John – we also find this very pointed statement: “Salvation belongs to our God... and to the Lamb.” Then a little later it says: “...for the Lamb will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life...”

That too is ‘...telling it like it is!’ Salvation belongs to the Lamb – it doesn’t belong to any one group or individual who may think that they have got a secret code or password.

It doesn’t belong to any one group who thinks they have an exclusive relationship or revelation that make them better or more “saved” than others.

One of our problems is that we have so many competing voices vying for our attention and our allegiance. “Everywhere we go, there are voices calling out - voices that say ‘buy this’ or ‘do this’ or ‘say this’ or ‘go this direction or ‘act this way’ or ‘don’t tend to that need.’ There are voices competing with one another, vying for our attention, seeking to gain control of our lives in big and little ways.” (The Rev. Ken Kesselus, Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C, 2010 – Episcopal News Service)

Of course, another problem we have with the sheep metaphor is that of not wanting to see ourselves as part of a flock. We much prefer the notion of the individual who is master of his/her own fate. The in-charge, rugged individual who is in control.

Following a shepherd has little appeal for us. Of course it is the greatest difference between us and sheep. Sheep don’t try to be shepherds; they seem content to be sheep.

Salvation is something that God does, not something we do – even by our correct belief and perfect behavior.

Perhaps the author of John’s gospel did the best job of telling it like it is when he wrote, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16

It seems to me that one of the problems we have is that we take a passage like John 3:16 and decide to use it as a battering ram against people who may or may not believe as we do.

We think “now that we believe, we have something no one else has, unless they are like us – it implies that we are better than, holier than, more blessed than – others. The emphasis becomes

on our belief about our belief instead of on the miraculous grace of a God who saves through sacrificial love.

A little earlier I said, “Coming to church does not make you a Christian anymore than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger.”

But then, if you want a hamburger, and you go to McDonald’s or Burger King or Wendy’s or wherever, you can sure get one. So, too, if you want to be a Christian, church is a good place to start.

Does our professed belief in the risen Christ make a difference in our lives, or is this just an attractive venue for Sunday morning coffee with a reasonably intelligent, fairly affluent, group of nice people? Let me “tell it like it is.”

Church is where you find others who are on the same journey.

Church is where you hear the word proclaimed.

Church is where you encounter the mystery of God in the sacraments -- the breaking of bread.

Church is where you encounter the risen Christ – in the lives of others -- both in and out of the church.

Church, this church, is where you can witness and be a part of the ministry of Christ in the world in many, many ways.

Let me “tell it like it is” and give you just a few suggestions.

You are given the opportunity to pray with and for one another in our worship and in your own private prayers.

You have a bulletin --- in it are the names of persons who are on our prayer list --- pray for them -- pray that their needs be met, that their health be restored, that their anxiety and fear be quelled.

Pray for those men and women who are serving here and abroad in the armed forces. Pray for their safety and for their safe return home. Pray for an end to war and for the reign of peace among the nations and people of the earth.

Here at Holy Comforter Church, you are given many opportunities to witness to God's love in the world by giving of your time and talent in a variety of outreach programs like Loaves and Fishes, Room in the Inn, the Shelter feeding program, ESL classes and tutoring children of ESL parents, the Stop Hunger Now program. Occasionally, there is a Habitat for Humanity build and many other opportunities for service.

You have opportunities as well in 'In reach' ministries such as Stephen Ministry, Lay Eucharistic Visitors, plus the myriad of other valuable ways to serve God and each other --- ushering, teaching Sunday School, VBS – the list in this church is practically endless.

In the spirit of "Tell it like it is," let me just say that Church is something you 'do.' It is not a spectator sport. You do church by praying, worshiping and serving – that is how you encounter God.

You are a Christian by virtue of your baptism, you live a Christian life as you live and love in a Community of faith. Let me tell it like it is. We are saved by grace – God's love freely given without any doing our part to be deserving of that love.

God's love for us is clearly manifested in the sacrifice of Christ.

Let me tell it like it is. If we follow Christ, we are to love as he loved us – by giving ourselves in sacrifice for others.