

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Acts 4:5-12

⁵ The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶ with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷ When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹ if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰ let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' ¹² There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Commentary

After healing a lame beggar outside the Temple and calling on the astonished crowd to repent, Peter and John were arrested for "disturbing the peace." In fact, Acts 4:2 says the religious authorities were "much annoyed" at the apostles. Today's text records their arraignment before the authorities. They are called before the Sanhedrin, a council of priests and scribes with both religious authority and limited civil power to hear cases brought by the Jewish community. Annas and Caiaphas, two of the men on the council, had conducted the secret hearings that condemned Jesus. The question the council put to Peter and John – "By what power or by what name did you do this?" is a question about authority. In the ancient world, to know the name of a person gave a certain amount of control over them. So the question about the name may also be about control. How can we control whoever gave you the power to do this? Peter asserts the power to heal came from "the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead." The implication is that even though the council had Jesus killed, the power and work of Jesus could not be stopped, but continued in those who believed in him and followed him. The *stone* refers to Jesus. The *cornerstone* probably means the corner capstone that binds two walls together. So, by analogy, it would be Jesus who holds the church together and makes it strong. There is salvation in no one but Jesus Christ, Peter says. That statement has been a part of the impetus for Christian mission for two

thousand years. We have seen ourselves as messengers of an eternal truth, offering salvation to the world while there is still time to grasp it.

Reflection

1. Today, many in the church question the exclusivity stressed by Peter, who clearly asserts that salvation is through Jesus alone. Is God revealed to humankind through religious expressions other than Christianity? If so, what unique claims can we make for Christian faith?
2. The word *healed* is from the same root as the word *saved*. Healing is a part of salvation and salvation is involved in healing. In what way does healing come through Jesus for the individual? For the world? For the church?

1 John 3:16-24

¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? ¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Commentary

Jesus showed us what love is. He laid down his life for us. Therefore, says the author of First John, we ought to lay down our lives for the community. Jesus' self-giving is not a momentary act of heroism; rather, the writer establishes the idea that self-sacrifice for the benefit of others is the way to life. We lay down our lives by paying practical attention to those who lack the basic necessities of life. Love calls us to provide for their needs – this is the durable responsibility of love on the part of the faith community. How do we know our lives are authentic? We check our hearts. In the Bible, the heart refers to the seat of moral and spiritual consciousness. There are two possibilities: First, our hearts may condemn us without a full account of the evidence. In that case, an all-knowing higher court (God) overturns the verdict. Second, our hearts may not condemn us because we know we accept the command to believe in Jesus Christ. By faith in him, we are bold to stand before God. How can we live so our hearts will not condemn us? The writer is clear – we walk the talk. When we pay practical, concrete attention to those who lack the basic necessities, we are loving in truth. For First John, love is not an emotion, or an abstract principle; it is a direct action on behalf of those in need. Provided we keep God's commandment of love for one another, then we will receive from God

whatever we ask. In other words, if we do what is pleasing to God, then we will ask only for those things that God is eager to give us. What is pleasing to God is our living in response to Jesus' commandments. What are the commandments? First, we are commanded to believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus. This means more than paying lip service. It means a commitment to the person of Jesus Christ and to his work and his power in the world. Second, the commandment is ethical. We are called to love one another in concrete ways. Loving means being aware of one another, being open and vulnerable to one another, faithfully serving one another. It also means becoming responsible over the long haul for those who have needs that we can help meet.

Reflection

1. How does the author of First John define true love? What are the practical implications of this definition?
2. First John calls us to a life of loving self-sacrifice, evidenced in working to ensure that all have the basic necessities of life. What are you doing to fulfill this call?

John 10:11-18

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away--and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Commentary

Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd and then draws on Old Testament metaphors to explain what he means. The "good," or "model," shepherd is described in Ezekiel 34:11-16 as one who cares for the sheep, rescues them, and feeds them; he tends the weak, injured, and lost. When Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus meant he was fulfilling God's promises and doing God's work. This is a powerful statement to a hostile audience who had to recognize that they were not doing the work of the shepherd, even though they held the office. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep; the hired hand, like the bad shepherd in Ezekiel 34:3-6, 8-10 flees at the first sign of trouble. The kings of Judah did not die for their people; rather, they asked their people to die for them. Jesus knows his own (those who believe), and they know him, like sheep who respond to their shepherd's voice rather than to the voice of a stranger. Knowledge here is a category of relationship, not information. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because of his relationship with God and his sheep. He lays down his life for the

sheep because of this relationship. The flock whom the shepherd knows is not limited to Israel (or to Christians). All who hear and obey Jesus' voice belong to Christ's flock. In the last two verses of our passage, the shepherd metaphor is dropped and Jesus speaks directly about his death and relationship with God. His death is a voluntary act of love on behalf of the world he loves. This is not a matter of a loving Son placating a Father who is outraged at the world's sin; it is rather a boundless love of God and Christ for all creation. Jesus chose to die as an expression of that love. But his death is an incomplete act of love until the Resurrection and Ascension, when the great work of victory and salvation is complete.

Reflection

1. What does it mean to live as one of Jesus' sheep? What metaphor other than the image of sheep speaks to you of your relationship to Jesus Christ?
2. The Good Shepherd "knows" his own sheep and they "know" him. If "knowledge" in this context refers to a relationship rather than to information, what does that "knowledge" empower us to do and be? What are the responsibilities we assume when we take on that "knowledge?"

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 23

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² **He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;**

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

⁴ **Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff-- they comfort me.**

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ **Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.