

**6 Easter A    May 21, 2017**

**Loving God Back**

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Rebecca Nye, a Godly Play trainer and storyteller, tells a powerful story about the time her three-year-old daughter told the parable of the Good Shepherd. For those of you don't know or can't remember, Godly Play is a unique religious formation program created by an Episcopal priest. It uses traditional storytelling and wooden images to familiarize and help children apply the stories of the Bible, from both the Old and New Testaments, to their lives. I believe you used it for a while here at Church of the Good Shepherd. I myself am a trained Godly Play storyteller and have used Godly Play with children, teenagers, adults, and even nursing home residents with great success. The Godly Play method allows children to visualize themselves in the stories by asking wondering questions such as "I wonder what part of this story is just for you." It is the wondering questions that can lead to some pretty powerful moments in Godly Play classrooms, where children can be free to be the theologians who can help us see God.

It was that sort of revelation Rebecca experienced when her daughter told the Parable of the Good Shepherd. To give us a refresher: The way the story goes, we are introduced to the good shepherd, a sheepfold made of strips of felt, for while Godly Play is not told on a flannel board, it seems impossible for us to have Sunday school without felt. We are also introduced to a blue piece of felt that is the cool, clear, refreshing water, small black pieces that are places of danger, and the sheep, all of which are a slightly different color. The story takes place on a large green piece felt, and begins with the Good Shepherd leading the sheep to the good, green grass, then to the cool clear water, and through places of danger back to the safety of the sheepfold. If one sheep should get lost, the story goes, the Good Shepherd will keep looking until he finds the sheep, and brings it back to the sheepfold where the shepherd is so happy he just can't be happy by himself, so he invites all his friends and they have a celebration.

Rebecca watched her daughter tell the story in its traditional way. But when the story was done, her daughter kept going, and took the sheep back to the places of danger where she described violent situations that disturbed her mother. But Rebecca didn't stop her, she let her continue to tell the story. Then the Good Shepherd came and took the sheep back to the sheep fold and put the pieces of felt representing the dangerous places, under the piece representing the water. After that, the Good Shepherd put the sheep to bed, and told the sheep a bedtime story. But the sheep were not happy, they needed blankets to go to sleep. Where was the

Good Shepherd going to get blankets? There were no blankets in the story. Ah, the daughter cleverly had the Good Shepherd retrieve those black pieces, the places of danger, that somehow had been transformed by the cool, clear, refreshing water to become blankets that the Good Shepherd used to tuck in the sheep. But the sheep still were not happy. Some needed a drink of water. Some wanted another story. Some wanted to be tucked in repeatedly. Rebecca reported that as she watched her daughter tell the story, each time the sheep asked for more the Good Shepherd showed what he was made of: unconditional love and patience, characteristics, Rebecca pointed out, her daughters' parents don't show when their children attempted to extend bedtime routines because the parents get tired and grumpy.

Finally, all the sheep were asleep. And Rebecca's daughter moved the Good Shepherd outside the sheep fold and said, "Oh, the Good Shepherd is lonely now. He might want the sheep to wake up, and love him back."

And so a three year old touched on one of the great mysteries of faith; the mystery the author of John's Gospel wrote about in today's Gospel lesson: the mystery of a God who loves us, who shows us God's love for us in the person of Jesus, so that we could develop our relationship with God and just love God back.

What does it look like to love God? Surely God doesn't want a nice card on Valentine's Day, flowers on Mother's Day, a new grill on Father's Day, or presents on God's Birthday. Actually, I am not sure how we'd figure out when God's birthday is, and it seems to me we are the ones who get all the presents on Jesus' birthday. Love, we need to remember, at least the word love in the New Testament, is not a feeling of attachment or romance. The word translated love in the New Testament is a word that indicates a person's choices and actions. Love, agape, is a conscience decision that is reflected in all a person says and does.

Which is what the author of John's Gospel started with in the section of our reading for this morning, when Jesus said loving him is to simply follow his commandments. Remember, Jesus' commandments are to love. To love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus didn't give a list of do's and don'ts, he didn't have check list of dates where we are to do certain tasks at certain times of certain days. There is so way to regulate love. Instead he let his disciples and us decide for ourselves if our thoughts, our actions, our words reflect our love for God and each other or not. If we are willing to grow deeper in love with God through Jesus, or not.

Now that might sound vague. Or confusing. Or frightening. And it seems it might have sounded similarly distressing to Jesus' disciples, who were listening to Jesus' very long goodbye before his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Things were about to change, and Jesus was trying to both comfort and encourage his

disciples, which is why Jesus promised not to abandon his followers, he wasn't going to leave them orphaned, or totally alone, without love or connection. He promised to send them another Advocate, something much like he himself who will be with them.

You may be familiar with the term paraclete, the word in Greek translated Advocate in today's Gospel reading. We always get a Gospel reference to the paraclete, a word that means helper, comforter, advocate every Sunday before Ascension Day, the day we celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven. But today's Gospel has more to it than just helping us navigate the liturgical calendar. It is the reminder that we are not alone, that we are deeply loved by a deeply loving God, who created the world and everything in it, who gives us everything we need, who through Jesus, has reached out to us and through this Advocate, the Holy Spirit, not only walks with us through all the places we go in life, even the dangerous ones, also calls to us to live into that love and give just as much as we have been given.

Perhaps one way to understand the Holy Spirit, is that the Holy Spirit is our guide for learning how to agape, how to give love, to be in relationship with God, each other, and a world that may not be aware of God's loving presence.

This past week, our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, released a statement asking for all Episcopalians to join him and others in our ecumenical fellowship to fast, pray, and advocate this year. All of which are ways to love God and love our neighbors. Fasting, a word I've seen many people refuse to explore because they think it means not eating, when it actually means refraining or obtaining from something in order to better understand our dependence on God. Food is just one thing a person can choose to abstain from that will give a person the time and opportunity to reflect on our common dependence on the resources God has given not to one group of people, but all people.

Prayer is essential to being in relationship with God, prayer that isn't just asking God for the stuff we want, whether it material things, or diseases to be healed, or troubles to go away. Prayer is also listening to God, sometimes the prayer that I find the most powerful is the prayer asking God to give me the wisdom to know what God wants me to do and the courage and strength to do it. The main part of that prayer is listening and receiving and following through.

Advocating might be the most challenging part of the Presiding Bishop's call to action. Advocating means to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Advocating means walking along side those who the prestigious, powerful and popular would rather avoid. When you are someone who has had to work hard just to be heard or recognized yourself, sharing that privilege with someone else might be

pretty challenging. Maybe that is when remembering that the Advocate is another way of describing God the Holy Spirit, whose purpose is to do just that with us, with you and me, can be the encouragement we need. Because advocating is another way we love God.

Today's Gospel also challenges us to reflect, as individuals and as a parish, on our relationship with God, with each other, and our community and how we love God who loves us. Certainly, we can be proud of our many ministries that already reflect God's love that feeds the hungry every Wednesday, knits beautiful prayer shawls that comfort the sick and lonely, opens our chapel to provide a quiet place of rest and prayer, and the many other ways we share what God has given us.

Whenever we talk about the Holy Spirit, I remember the way my family and I felt the Presence of the Holy Spirit when I supplied here a few years ago, and how we all felt the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, call us together. And we listened. And here we are, nearly two and a half years later, growing together in God's love. Today's Gospel might challenge us to begin to reflect on what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do together. What ways might our ministries that already reflect God's love be strengthened, or enhanced, or deepened to provide more than just one hour a week for people to gather in a safe place for conversation and interaction with church people.

I believe with all my heart that God is in the midst of us, has called us to together for a reason, and that we are living into that, day by day, step by step, loving God back. And it seems now is the time to hear the words of Jesus in today's Gospel as a reminder that our call together is to show the world God's love, and to pray to be open to the Holy Spirit and God's continuing call to love those we are in the midst of, with what we say and what we do. Exploring this call further might be intimidating, exciting, frightening, or inspiring, but however we feel, perhaps a good start is the reminder we aren't alone, the Holy Spirit, our Advocate, is right here with us, just as the Holy Spirit always has been with us, through whatever was, and is and will be, guiding us to grow deeper into the love of God we are called to give.