

Sermon, St. David's, Good Shepherd Sunday, 4/25/2021 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

I “see” many of you on Facebook, but far fewer of you are on Twitter. My late friend Sean once said that he wasn't on Twitter because Twitter is a “cesspool.” That sounded a little harsh to me, but people can be pretty mean on there. But Twitter is also a trove of fascinating tidbits. Tons of misinformation, but also fascinating little bits of information.

A couple of weeks ago, I was scrolling through Twitter and found that “pupaphobia” is a word that means fear of puppets, including but not limited to marionettes. I was astonished to learn that this is an actual fear with a name, because I thought I was the only one. As a child, marionettes terrified me, and I found that embarrassing so never admitted it until learning the word pupaphobia. My family's favorite movie was *The Sound of Music* and I loved it too, except that there's a whole scene with marionettes that I detested. When that came on I needed to go get popcorn or use the restroom or any excuse to not have to watch those creepy puppets slumping and blinking and yodeling around. Or, when I was a kid my grandmother used to take me to a puppet show every year in Laguna Beach, California. This was an expensive big deal and I was clearly supposed to be grateful, and I hope I acted like I was, but I was always inwardly cringing in my seat because I found those marionettes unbearably creepy.

But I never knew that was anything other than my own weirdness until I learned the word “pupaphobia” on Twitter. Suddenly I felt *known*.

Jesus said, “I know my own and my own know me.”

The longer I serve here, the more I learn about all of you. I look out from my spot up here in the front and I see not only you but stories that you have shared with me over the years. Some stories that I have witnessed myself. The more I know about you, the more I feel like I get a teeny taste of the love God has for you. What a gift to be your pastor. Some of you have known each other longer than I have known you, and you know things about each other that I don't. Knowing another person, another Christian, is a gift.

Jesus knows all of you. Jesus knows about nonsensical fears of marionettes and the secret sin that you haven't told anyone about and all of the things that you have ever done wrong in your life: Jesus knows all of that and loves you. We are those treasured members of his flock.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, which tends to irritate me every time it rolls around. Here we are again, I think. Jesus, shepherd, blah blah blah. I get annoyed because it sometimes seems like such a saccharine image: a white guy with a well-groomed beard cradling a clean little lamb. That image doesn't reflect the dirty, sweaty, tiring work of an actual shepherd. Loving us is work. Loving each other is work. Love takes work.

One of the prayers that I as a priest get to say in an Episcopal funeral is “acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming.” Those words get me every time. I said those same words when my own father died. I could barely get them out. At his death, my father did not look like a clean little lamb. He was wearing a red T-shirt that wasn't his own and was horribly skinny and hadn't been able to do

much more than moan all day. But I knew that he was a lamb of God's own flock. I knew my father would be welcome.

And I welcomed the word "sinner" in that prayer: "acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming." I know that my beloved father was a sinner. Many people feel beaten up by the church by being labeled as sinners, so when I stand up here I sometimes hesitate to use that word, because it's been used abusively. But I know that I am a sinner. To sin doesn't mean to commit an unredeemable atrocity. Sinning means missing the mark. I fall short of the priest God wants me to be, the person God wants me to be. The Christian Jesus needs me to be. I mess up. I pray the confession twice every Sundays and I need it both times because I've always sinned in at least some small way between the two services.

And while I'm not a preacher who shouts at you all about what sinners you are, I believe every single person in this room today as well as everyone watching from home, including those who are not watching the livestream but are catching up later, and those reading this sermon online: I believe all of you are sinners. I also know that God loves all of you. None of your sins can separate you from God's love.

Seeing others and knowing others is a huge gift, especially if we can offer love even when we know them. Even when we know their flaws.

The epistle today says "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

This snippet is especially appropriate for Good Shepherd Sunday because words and speech aren't how shepherds show love to their sheep. Whispering sonnets to the lambs won't protect them: they have to beat back predators back with their crook.

I'm a writer, so I am much better at loving in word or speech. My cancer journey over the past year has shown me the importance of loving with truth and action. If you tuned in last week and saw our beloved friend the Rev. Martha Jenkins preaching and presiding, despite a hurting shoulder, then you know that I was on vacation last Sunday. I was visiting family in Arizona. Last year, when I started chemotherapy, many of my family members cut their hair short to show me by action that they loved me. They wanted to love in truth and action because they couldn't be with me during a pandemic. Or Gary, on our morning walks, wears a backpack with twenty-five pounds of rocks in it to slow him down because I walk more slowly now with my limited lungs. I treasure those gifts more than I can express with words. Cancer has shown me how much I have to learn about loving in truth and action.

As Episcopalians, we value words. Our prayer book is important. We pray in much the same way every Sunday. Then what? How do we share the love of Christ beyond these words and these walls? How will you endeavor to know others and love others in truth and action when you turn off the livestream or leave here today?