

May 12-13, 2019; John 10:22-30

You may have heard the prayer,

"Dear Lord, please make me into the person my dog thinks I am."

Even if you're out for 5 minutes to pick up the mail and greet a neighbor, your puppy may be thrilled to see you and greets you enthusiastically. Your dog is also smarter than you think.

He or she reads your facial expressions.

When you feel down, they intuitively know that you need extra close snuggling time. Over the years our dogs have been great companions but their training leaves a bit to be desired.

Some dogs are trained to sniff your clothes and find you in the wilderness. Our dog likes to lay in the dirty laundry pile.

Other dogs roll over, heel, and shake hands.

Our dog begs at the table.

Other dogs come when their master calls.

Our dog often pretends like she can't hear you, unless she hears the sizzle of an egg frying in the pan.

Sheep often get a bad rap about being unintelligent.

You don't see the sheep bomb-sniffing squad.

As far as I know sheep don't do too much but eat, grow wool, and get into trouble. Not that they're trying to get into trouble, but they don't think things through. They're vulnerable and yet do have fairly good memories. One thing they are very good at is human voice and facial recognition. They can be trained with rewards.

An Australian shepherd noticed that his daughter was feeding the new lambs willow leaves. As the lambs got older the leaders of the sheep followed his daughter, and then the shepherd himself.

The lead sheep (that I call the crew leaders) recognized this gentle shepherd, and would lead the other sheep to greener pastures.

When the sheep see Jesus, they see a shepherd who has their best interests at heart.

They hear a voice of promise when he calls them to new pastures.

They know he loves them.

He knows his sheep and his sheep know him.

We hear about sheep in the Psalms and throughout the Bible.

In today's gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem, celebrating the Feast of the Dedication or Hanukkah. He is facing the religious leaders, who are very irritated with him. They're asking,

"How long are you taking away our life?"

How long will you continue to annoy us, Jesus?"

This is the only place in this gospel in which Jesus is asked directly,

Are you the Messiah?"

Others had caught on earlier. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well who drank deeply of the Living Water? "Could he be the Messiah, he knows everything about me," she asks as she became the first evangelist for Jesus.

And Mary and Martha of Bethany, saw this in him, too.

They heard the voice of promise through Jesus.

They knew it deep in their hearts and were transformed through God's love.

The religious leaders ask Jesus:

Reveal yourself to us, Jesus, are you the Messiah?"

He told the religious leaders that they'd had plenty of chances to understand who he was.

Just look at his life! The miracles, the healings, the teaching.

Just like God he had power over life, death, and judgment.

Why did they even have to ask?!

Because Jesus was making their lives very difficult.

The common people were getting riled up and didn't accept the lot in life they'd been given as sinful, shameful folks living in desperation while the rich got richer and acted as though they were holier than thou.

And the worst of it for the leaders was when Jesus identified as the "I AM of God."

Throughout John's gospel, Jesus does works of God and speaks words of God. By showing grace upon grace to those living with human blindness and weakness he provides ample evidence of God's love for the world. All of this was initiated by God.

God gave the world love by sending Jesus.

Jesus knows God more fully than any one...ever!

He was one with God in will and work for salvation of the world.

Jesus embodied God and the world hasn't been the same since.

Also, in a most amazing way, we embody God.

When we come as little lambs and allow ourselves to be vulnerable and honest about who we are and what we've done our hearts connect with Christ.

We may become the crew leaders, the lead sheep that show others the way to the Good Shepherd.

Who is Jesus to you?

How has your personality changed over time because you are a Christian? //

Fresh Expressions is a way to act out Jesus' commandment to love your neighbors as yourselves, and ultimately guide other sheep to the Good Shepherd.

Wouldn't it would be fun this summer to regularly grill some dogs and brauts in someone's driveway that lives nearby and have kind of a tailgate party where we invite neighbors for food, getting to know them, and to love them?

Sometimes we get suddenly timid about these things.

We think we have to be so careful about making someone upset that we shy away from telling the gospel when the opportunity arises.

Sometimes we aren't even sure about sharing the times we have heard the voice of promise and how that has changed our lives.

In the book Almost Everything Anne La Mott writes,

The message to us kids was that we didn't have intrinsic value but we could earn it, and that we lived in a world of scarcity but just needed new things.

And so we put on a reasonable good personality, and succeeded in something so others that you were ok.

She tells a story about the youth Sunday School class she teaches.

She was teaching her one good message.

That we are loved and chosen as is, fearfully and wonderfully made, with love and awe, perfect and fragile.

We are all as lovely as sparrows, and all sparrows are sweet.

No one thinks, "*that sparrow is kind of a loser, and boy is that one letting herself go.*"

She asked the class if any of their best friends had acne, glasses, or problems at home, and if that made them love their friends less.

Of course not! She asked them to say, "*I have value.*"

And the teenagers were mortified to do so.

I has value! The little girl with buck-teeth and too young for braces finally said. *I has value.*

Ann said she wanted to get that tattooed on her forearm.

We can spend a lifetime in judgment for ourselves and others.

And then something happens when we are overwhelmed with the grace and mercy of God. We read the gospels and the words of Jesus become real as though the voice of promise is speaking them aloud to us. We release our fears and are changed.

And then the world, our past, or grief makes us feel badly again

And we don't know where else to turn.

So we return to God.

We go out in nature, take a look at one tiny blossom and know that because God created that blossom, and God created you, all will be well.

Life is like that. For a moment we see God clearly, and feel the fullness of Christ within us.

We feel as though we are embodying the Holy Spirit and working for the salvation of the world.

And yet another day, doubts are stronger than faith but somehow we roll out of bed, spend time with God, and are grateful for another day on this earth.

We continue to have faith that we are being transformed little by little
And each day the world is changing, too.

Decades ago we sang, "This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius,
when peace will guide the planet and love will steer the stars.

Aquarius, Aquarius."

So much has happened since we sang that song so hopefully.

And shared with everyone the sign we were born under.

Today we come face-to-face with Jesus and his promises.

We realize that even though the world has come a long ways.

We listen to the voice of the shepherd and have child-like trust that
God is the greatest necessity of life. We live humbly and gratefully as
a child of God, praying that life will be even less difficult and more
fulfilling.

Annie goes on to say...

Life lasts so briefly,

Like free theatre in the park-glorious and tedious;

Full of wonder and often hard to understand

But right before our very eyes,

And capable of rousing us, awakening us to life, to the

bright green and very real grass, the mess, the sky, the limbo.

This is the great unexpected promise, that we can choose now,
no matter our current conditions.

But we can't choose it for anyone else./

Life is like that. We all make choices.

Will we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and transparent?

Involved with God's people, not acting superior, skeptical, snarky, or too weird. But washing someone's windows or pulling their weeds, or teaching and feeding their kids, just because... that's what good neighbors do.

Jesus gave us the example of living deeply, of being so self-aware, so aware of the divine within himself, that he doesn't let the ego get in the way of love.

He doesn't waste time on wondering if the blind man likes him before healing him. He doesn't waste time checking to see if people who are hurting are angry with him, or if the religious leaders respect him. Unlike many of us, he doesn't hide who he truly is in fear that someone will go after him. Or may try to put him in his place.

Jesus sees himself fully and completely. And we can open ourselves to Christ by releasing all falsehoods and allowing him into our consciousness. When we listen to the voice of promise and answer the Good Shepherd's call, our consciousness can be completely and radically transformed into living love, grace, and faith.

You have this mysterious being inside.

God, the breath inside the breath, breathes through us and gives us hope. Amen.

(Do you hear the promises of God for you?)