

Fourth Sunday of Easter – 2022

Acts 20:17-35

Revelation 7:9-17

John 10:22-30

Unbelief can be a stubborn frame of mind. Do you know any stubborn people? One of my buddies says that he doesn't mind stubbornness. That's because the stubborn fellow tends to get the job done, doesn't give up. Perseverance is certainly a virtue. Perseverance plus mule headedness plus an outsized ego equals stubbornness. Perseverance plus an inability to admit that you were wrong plus loving yourself more than you love the truth equals stubbornness. Here's how my rather old dictionary defines stubborn (old dictionaries are the best, btw). "Inflexible in opinion or intention; unreasonably obstinate. Difficult to handle, manage or work with." If you stick to the right opinion, you demonstrate fortitude, a virtue. If you stick to a wrong-headed idea, you're manifesting a vice, stubbornness. How many marital disagreements become a traffic jam over that distinction?

When Aaron made the golden-calf and the Israelites started a bovine service at the foot of Mt. Sinai, God wasn't particularly pleased with their creative worship ideas. "And the Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people'" (Exodus 32:9). Stiff-necked; it is a synonym for unreasonably obstinate. Here's the background on that term: "a yoked animal might tighten its neck muscles to resist having its head turned to go in a new direction. Like a farm animal that refused to be guided, Israel refused to follow God's new direction for them" (Lutheran Study Bible). New direction? That sounds so casual, like choosing between a plaid skirt or a striped one. Israel refused to follow God's new direction... like getting out of Egypt, like no longer being slaves to tyrants, like heading to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey – refused to follow that direction, a good direction, pretty much the only direction? Unbelief is a stubborn thing; pig-headed and egotistical.

Look at it from Jesus' perspective. He knew who He was. He knew that He had come to redeem Israel, to set all of humanity free from sin and death by shedding His blood. He knew that His Word was truth, that His Word dripped with grace, dripped with divine love, with new life and irrepressible hope and that He Himself was the gate to heaven – and unbelief tore His Word to shreds, unbelief burned His Word at the stake, unbelief spit His Word out of its mouth. Jesus was having a little chat with some Jews who were "seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God" (John 5:18). That's how St. John puts it. To those Jews Jesus said this: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40). Stubborn; you **stubbornly refuse to come to me that you may have life.**

Unbelief crucified the Lord of Glory. In this late day, unbelief has charted a course toward crazy town and since they are stiff-necked, crazy town is where they will end up. Jesus was in the Temple courts, the colonnade of Solomon, and stiff-necked types came up to Him demanding answers. "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly" (John 5:24). Jesus was emphatic in His response. He addressed their stubborn disposition. It doesn't really come through in the English. Here's how the English Standard Version reads: "I told you,

but you do not believe” (John 5:25). Here’s a better translation: “I have *continually* told you and you *persistently* do not believe.” Why is that? Their persistent unbelief in the face of overwhelming evidence, why is that? Who can explain unbelief? I have a stubborn heart – I suppose that that’s not news to you. Who here does not have some semblance of a stubborn heart? All of you have a sinful nature. But not one of you, I suspect, wants to be hard, unmalleable clay in the Potter’s hand. Not one of you wants to become less faithful as the days pass by. Not one of you wants to put yourself above God, pursuing your own course, filling yourself with yourself.

Jesus knows us. He addresses our weaknesses. He breaks down our stubborn, selfish pride. He tells us just as surely as He has ever told anyone who He is, that He is Christ the King, the Beloved Son of the Eternal Father, the Messiah who has come to restore fallen humanity. We hear His voice. His miracles speak to *us*. The works that Jesus has done bear witness about Him. With every miracle that Jesus performed, He was telling the world: “I am the Christ.” When Jesus changed water into wine, what was He saying? He was saying that He would pour out His blood to unite His bride, the church, to Himself. The marriage feast of heaven – Christ’s cross is our invitation. The Lord’s miracles speak! When Jesus cleansed the leprous, what was He saying? He was saying the decay of death which is in our flesh will be reversed. He will take our disease upon Himself and extend to us His perfect health, His perfect holiness. He gave sight to the blind to tell us that He opens the eyes of our heart to see reality as it truly is – that a seemingly powerless Man dying on the cross is the omnipotent power of God. He has told us, and we believe. He raised Lazarus, He raised the widow of Nain’s Son, and He raised Jairus’ daughter to tell us: “I am the resurrection the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

The Lord Christ is the One who breaks down our stubborn heart. With His love, with His grace, with His blood and His eucharist and His baptism and His death and His resurrection and His Word and His Spirit. Forgiveness; Almighty God, in a gesture that has no comparison, forgives you through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Forgiven, loved, and treasured, you are a favored sheep in the flock of our Good Shepherd. He has called you by name. Your sin was put on Him, Christ the King. He took it; as your Good Shepherd, He laid down His life. Those sins which gnaw at your conscience and those sins which you have blown off or forgotten – He took them all that they might truly be taken away. He has told you all this and you believe. That’s because you are part of His flock. He gives you eternal life. That is a fact.

John Adams, before he became the second president of the United States, defended a group of British soldiers who had fired into a crowd – they killed five Americans. No one lined up as a lawyer to defend these soldiers, but Adams believed everyone deserved a proper defense. It was the Boston Massacre Trials of 1770. Adams presented a stellar legal defense for a group of men whom no one believed deserved it. In that trial, Adams said this: “Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.” Christianity is rather fond of facts, so let’s rehearse a few, shall we? We have a Creator. Our Father spoke life into being by the power of His Word. That’s a fact. Man was created in His image – male and female – splendid and holy and ideal. That’s a fact. Humanity plunged into sin by Adam and Eve’s rebellion. Original sin blights everyone

with a human father. That's a fact. We don't chafe at the Truth. We want more and more of the Truth. The Truth sets us free.

The eternal Son of God took upon Himself our flesh for the purpose of saving every single one of us. That's a fact. He lived a perfect life, He died an atoning death, He was placed in a real tomb. And that tomb is empty. He rose! Death could not hold our King. No matter what anyone should ever say to the contrary, no matter how high their emotion, no matter how dark their vitriol, no matter what human hall of power they inhabit – the tomb will still be empty and we will still be forgiven. No one can snatch us out of the Shepherd's pierced hand. That's a fact. Facts are stubborn things. They don't change when the political wind blows red or when it blows blue. "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen" (Revelation 7:10,12).