Fourth Sunday of Easter B 2021 Confidence before God from a good conscience

Acts 4:1 – 12

1 John 3:16 – 24

As this current Stay-at-home order reminds us of the strange times in which we live, so too, in the church, today marks a strange Good Shepherd Sunday; for the first two Scripture readings have no reference to Jesus as our Shepherd. The chosen hymn “Jesus loves me” also has no reference to the Good Shepherd. I have purposely left out the Gospel reading of the Good Shepherd in John 10. Only the collect of the Day gives us the hint of a Shepherd and Sheep.

Strange times and a strange Shepherd Sunday. But there is plenty of references to our Lord’s death and resurrection in the way of loving us.

Let’s begin with the world’s upside-down definition of the idea of love. Love according to the world is self-serving and self-pleasing. It holds it as the highest good, so whatever makes me feel good is what love is about. So, one can leave his or her spouse in order to join together with someone else if it makes one feel good.

John describes the greatest love as laying down your life for your friends. He wrote in John 15:13 “*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”* Does that sound like an idea or a concrete action? Is that action based on what makes you feel good? Is it done to serve yourself or someone else? That verse is heard a lot on the eleventh of November, Remembrance Day, when we stand in awe of all those soldiers who died for us and our country. No small sacrifice indeed!

Jesus did that for us. Both John and Peter preached that. Peter also preached as recorded in Acts that the resurrection from the dead is found in Jesus. The basis for everyone’s resurrection is found in our Lord’s. Then shockingly and yet not, Peter and John found themselves in prison for it. Their times were stranger than ours, but wait, ours can get stranger yet.

Who knows how far the Woke generation will push us into revolution? The provincial government’s empowerment of police to stop, question and fine people outdoors or in their cars based on their address or purpose for travel is another Canadian precedent from this pandemic.

How much longer, O Lord, must we endure not meeting together and then only to have spoken liturgies which does not reflect the one in heaven? How many seals are broken from your Revelation in our strange times?

Yet one thing is constant. One thing remains forever. One thing will never change: Jesus died for us and is Risen, nevermore to die!

By this we know God’s love. It is real. It is not an idea or an ideal. It is found in a dead God and a Risen Lord Jesus. God’s love has no limits or restrictions. Jesus laid down his life for us and we ought to do the same for friends and brothers.

John wrote in his first epistle/letter: *By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for* ***the brothers****.* By brothers he means what Jesus meant by friends. Jesus called his followers his friends and proves it by telling them about his death and resurrection for them, his friends. When John wrote of laying down our lives for our brothers, he does not mean neighbours or anyone belonging to the brotherhood of humanity. He holds a brother as coming from the same family. Not the human family but all those begotten of God, and by the Holy Spirit born again into God’s eternal family.

In other words, we are to lay down our lives for our spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ as Christ laid down his life for us. When Christ taught us to love our enemies, it is reminder that we were once God’s enemies for whom Jesus prayed and died. Now our willingness to die for others begins with the fellow members of Grace and stretches to all who have been baptized into Christ Jesus, namely all in the one holy, Christian and apostolic church.

How are you coming along with that? Are you ready to do that? How will social distancing turn us away from being willing to die for our fellow Christians? Can we die for them when we cannot even get close to them? Or what about our natural drive of doing only that which serves ourselves and no one else? Isn’t that the way you live your life, to think about what is best for yourself?

John asks us, “*How does God’s love abide in* anyone who closes his heart to his brother in need by not sharing his goods with him or does not want to lay down his life for his brother in Christ?

Busted and indicted! We stand condemned before God. Not by the law of governments that come and go, but by the law of Almighty God, we are condemned for our woeful lack of living and dying for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And then our hearts condemn us when our selfishness and coldness come out into the open. When we fail to love Christians by willing to die for them, our hearts become heavy as if carrying around a ton of bricks on our shoulders.

This is how our consciences become burdened. A bad conscience is the same as a heavy heart. A bad conscience is like trying to see through a dirty window. You cannot see clearly because of the dirt. How far can you drive with a dirty windshield? It causes accidents as a dirty conscience causes one to lose faith.

Have you lost steam spiritually speaking? Have you lost your way because of the spiritual dirt? This is why we don’t feel like praying, reading the bible, or going to church when we are allowed.

Yet do not despair, there is One who is greater than our hearts. What a relief to hear that I do not determine what is right and good and fair and that I am not the law-maker, judge and jury. Your conscience does not make the rules. No, the One who made you does, and He has another word to say to you, right now and right here.

Jesus died for you while you were a sinner and God’s dirty enemy. He made you God’s friend by giving up his holy life for you. His holy blood cleanses you from all sin. From the sin that comes from my selfishness and the sin that others have done to me. All sin is cleansed by the death of Jesus. It is guaranteed by His resurrection.

But how can I ever get a good conscience before God with such a past? Can I still have a good standing with God? If it depends on me there is no chance. If it depends on my actions of courage and bravery on the battlefield, then I am lost and still are condemned.

But God gave you a good conscience when He baptized you. How can this be? Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3:21, *Baptism … now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

Baptism now saves you. Now, means today. This day and every day, God gives me a good conscience and lifts my spiritual burden in my baptism. That makes baptism a powerful cleansing that lasts forever, based on God’s promise not my performance.

Begin each day by remembering your baptism which allows you to come before your heavenly Father who gives you access to salvation, the gift of forgiveness by the Holy Spirit and a good conscience.

A good conscience before God depends on God’s final word in His Son, who washed you and is greater than your heart. Christ promised. He lives forever and will not break His promise to you.

This is not a word of God, but God’s final word of forgiveness that will not be overturned. God has the last word from the cross: It is finished. Stand up straight, be confident, pray boldly and enjoy a good conscience as God’s baptized child. Because of Jesus, the Father is well-pleased with you.