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SERMON 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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Listen to these words from our readings today:

*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.*

That's from One John. So is this:

*...this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another*

And from our Gospel? This:

*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

Love in truth and action so we can be one flock under one shepherd...

It's my second and final time to give a sermon to my preaching class at seminary. This is also going to be the sermon I give at my field ed church on Sunday and I really, really want it to be a good sermon.

The way it works is each one of us preaches while the class listens. Then we continue to stand at the front of the room while people give us feedback. Sometimes there are questions. Mostly the feedback is practical, useful and kind.

It's the Sunday after the Charleston massacre. You remember? June 17, 2015. South Carolina. A church like ours here. A group of people doing bible study together and a stranger appears at the door. He's invited to join them. They surround him with their welcome and kindness. And then he shoots them. Nine of them die. Because they are black.

So I write my sermon on that. I pour my heart into it. And I'm preaching this sermon to a room that is two thirds people of colour. And I'm preaching about racist hate. I'm hopeful I will pass muster but the feedback is lowkey. Until... the prof says "Your sermon is good and... using 'the Prince of Darkness' as a metaphor for evil is very uncomfortable for people whose skin is not white." Round the room heads are nodding, tension releasing. My teacher is white. She can say that to me. Too risky for the others to name what I've done. Ahhhh. I see it. BUT I love the powerful sound of that metaphor. Only it's not powerful to my classmates. It's painful and cruel. Without meaning to I too have been racist. Like that killer. I am so sorry. I do a complete rewrite on that sermon. What good is it to preach against racism if I'm racist in how I do it?

Looking back now on that day in class I realize my classmates were watching me. Waiting to see. Would I get it? I didn't really. Sure, I got it on an intellectual level that using that metaphor would be a form of racism. But did I get how deeply painful

it was to my classmates to have their skin colour equated with evil, my classmates who all had a call to serve God in the ministry? Did I understand that they had a lifetime of experiences of being seen in negative ways not for anything they'd done but simply for the colour or their skin? Had I walked a mile in their shoes? No.

In order to be one flock with our one and only shepherd it's essential for me to examine my own racism. In order to be one flock with our one and only shepherd I have to search out the ways in which I collude with racism in our society. Because it doesn't matter if I don't *mean* to be hurtful or disrespectful or hateful when I am. My intentions don't account for much if my unconscious attitudes and beliefs, *my* actions and words say that I matter more than someone whose skin colour is not white. And that is how I was raised to see the world. Like any of us who are white.

This week I took part in a clergy conference on racism. It was painful and uncomfortable. It was more information than I could assimilate at one sitting. It was illuminating if you could see it that way to learn that we, Canada, long before the US embraced slavery, had our own thriving slave culture. Sure didn't hear about that in my Canadian history classes! It was breath-taking and heart-stopping, brutal and bleak. And... it was blessing and grace. Blessing and grace because any time something which is counter to the realm of God is brought out into the light of day it's like draining an abscess. Any time something counter to love and justice and mercy is exposed we can begin to heal that broken and wounded place in our world. Any time we are willing to look into ourselves, see the places where we've bought the lies about people of colour, and begin to clear those toxins out we are choosing to stand with the Great Shepherd. We are standing with Jesus. And that's what I want to do. Don't you?

I'm not sure exactly how to do all that except by one stumbling step at a time. And I'm beginning to understand more and more clearly that my humility is required. That my seeking to understand is essential. That I cannot race out and 'fix this'. Indeed my trying to fix this would be just one more patronizing and insensitive mistake. It's my turn to take direction from others. It's my turn to step back and let people of colour take the lead. It's my turn to ask questions and then listen to the answers with everything I've got. It's my turn to say, "I'll stand with you. Where do you want me to stand? How can I be of use? What practical things can I do to support your journey towards claiming your own strength and power and place beside Jesus?"

And I can take action on things I do know about. That's what these dresses are about. Last fall on October 4<sup>th</sup> I began to spot red dresses hanging in the woods around Salt Spring. Aha - the National Day of Action for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. I was too late, I thought, to join in, but next year? Next year I'll have a red

dress to hang up in solidarity with all those who've lost a sister, a mother, a daughter, an auntie. So I went to the thrift store and found two red dresses. How to choose? On the other hand, why choose? One for my home and one for the church. Because don't we of the Parish of Salt Spring Island want to stand with our indigenous sisters and brothers?

And, why wait til next October 4<sup>th</sup>? Aren't there women and girls disappearing all the time on different stretches of highway all over Canada? According to indigenous women's groups there may be over 4000 women and girls missing. Four thousand families grieving, wondering, hoping. Or not. Shouldn't this always be a source of outrage and grief for all of us? That these serial killers are not being caught and stopped? So I'll be hanging these dresses up soon. Maybe you'd like to come and help me.

And then what? What else can I do? Are you asking yourself "What can I do? How can I be a shepherd with Jesus in this situation? How can I help?"

I hope so. It will take all of us.

Amen.