A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Andrew Van Culin, Rector

The Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year C)
17 Easter 2016

_In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit._

“I know them, and they follow me.”

Whenever a Gospel passage speaks of eternal life, it is easy for us to get caught. Who gets eternal life? Does this mean some do and some don’t? If so, why? More importantly, am I in or out? Am I wheat or chaff, a goat or a sheep? What about him or her, or them – whoever them might be? And, perhaps most profoundly, what kind of God would choose some and not others?

And when we do fall into this trap, we inevitably overlook the real heart of the passage.

This is certainly a possibility with today’s Gospel reading as Jesus say, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” To focus on eternal life, what happens when we breath our very last breath and the resulting questions of who is in or who is out, is to miss the Evangelist’s intended subject: relationship.

Throughout Eastertide, the Gospel readings which we will read on Sunday morning highlight Jesus’, and therefore God’s, relationship to humankind and to his followers. Obviously, nothing will speak more directly to the subject than our remembrance of Good Friday and Easter Day. There, on those two interwoven days, we profoundly remember the love which marks God’s relationship to humankind, a love which extends to the cross and to the grave; and that even death, death at our own hands, cannot diminish the love God possess for us and for all of humankind.

But that is not all there is to know about God’s love – otherwise today’s lessons would be unnecessary.

Today’s lesson, however, goes a step further and speaks more directly about Jesus’ relationship to his Church. It is critical, essential even, to note that today’s Gospel lesson is _not_ a story of who is in and
who is out when it comes to either God’s love or eternal life – Good Friday and Easter Day speak to that – the Cross and the tomb proclaim for all to hear that God’s love and life are for all, there can and should be no question there.

No, today’s exchange between Jesus and those whom he encounters in the Temple is about Jesus’ relationship to his followers, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” The embrace and love of Jesus, punctuated on Good Friday and Easter, is not only general and broad, encompassing all of humankind, but also specific. Jesus’ all encompassing love is not only a broad love for the entirety of creation, but a specific love for a specific people – in today’s lesson, for the community who follows him. And, as we heard again last week in his encounter with Peter on the shores of Lake Tiberias, the object of Jesus’ love doesn’t end even here at the level of the community, but extends even to the specific individuals within it.

Over and over again, in story after story, we are reminded that God’s loving relationship with humankind is not only universal, that is, for all, but local and individual. There seems to be little question to the former, that is that God’s love is universal, yet we struggle mightily when the universal becomes local and even individual. Yet this, too, has always been true. When God called Abram out of Ur, the promise was not only for a person but a people; specific people who would come have a distinct place and culture in the world. When God sent Moses back to Egypt is was not for Moses alone, but for a people bound in slavery. When God spoke through the Judges and Prophets of old, it was not for their sake, but the sake of a people that he cried out. And, when Jesus walked the dusty roads of ancient Palestine, he encounter specific people along the way – Nicodemus and Peter, Mary and Lazarus, Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus – individuals with names and families that he taught and healed, and it was specific communities – Jericho, Bethany, Samaria, Capernaum, Cana, Bethlehem and Nazareth – that he visited with his peace and the proclamation of God’s kingdom. Ours is an incarnational faith, a faith that incarnates the mystery of God’s universal love in the person of Jesus, and his was a specific love, a love that extended to real communities and to real people.

Francis de Sales speaks to this love with unsurpassed clarity: Consider the Eternal Love God has borne you, in that, even before our Lord Jesus Christ became Man and suffered on the Cross for you, His Divine Majesty designed your existence and loved you. When did He begin to love you? When He began to be God, and that was never, for He ever was, without beginning and without end. Even so He always loved you from Eternity, and therefore He made ready all the graces and gifts with which He has endowed you. He says by His Prophet, “I have loved thee” (and it is you
that He means) “with an everlasting love, therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn thee” (Jeremiah 31:3).

But what then of our relationship to God? If God loves us, not only in a general, all encompassing, sort of way, but in a specific, “I know you, Peter and I know you Mary, and I love you through and through”, sort of way, how are we to respond? And how are we, the community of those who know this truth, invited to respond?

Simply put, with gratitude.

Of course we don’t, and won’t, do this perfectly every time, however, the first response of a recipient to a gift ought to be thankfulness: thankfulness both for the gift received and for the gift-giver herself.

And so it should be no surprise that at the heart of our Christian community is set our worship in which the gift of God’s un-ending and ever-present love is re-presented for our reception; and we, in turn, are invited again and again to offer our thanks.

At the heart of this exchange, and what makes this exchange complete, is our thanksgiving. And so the Celebrant begins our Eucharistic prayer with an invitation to give thanks followed by a remembrance of the gift for which our thanks is given.

Listen for a moment, to the words of our prayer to come:

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give God thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, but chiefly are we bound to praise you for the glorious resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; for he is the true Paschal Lamb, who was sacrificed for us, and has taken away the sin of the world. By his death he has destroyed death, and by his rising to life again, he has won for us everlasting life.
While each season of the Church year emphasizes God’s gift differently, our response is consistently the same – gratitude and thanksgiving. This is what we have to offer in response to God’s unending gift to us.

We show our gratitude in other ways as well. The pledge we make is meant, first and foremost, as a reflection of our personal gratitude to God. It is made, not in response merely to something here at Christ Church, but rather, first and foremost, in response to the first gift given, that same eternal love of God’s of which Francis de Sales’ so eloquently wrote. We make this pledge because we are grateful to God and we want this gift to be known and experienced by others.

So it is also, with our service, within this community and beyond. We serve as a reflection of our gratitude, not merely our obligation. In the same way that a husband serves his wife, or a parent a child, we serve out of gratitude and love. We serve in order to make the great gratitude within us visible and tangible for all to see and know.

Gratitude, of course, must also be a hallmark of the Christian community, and permeate not only our relationship with God, but ultimately our relationship with one another. It is easy in a community of this size to get caught up in the un-ending tasks than need to be accomplished – take it from me, I have gotten caught up in them all too often.

But we must remember that we are bound together in this community not by the work to be done, but by love that we share; love for God who has embraced us, and love for one another, the incarnate manifestations of that Love. And so our community at its best is marked by gratitude and affection for the gifts we exchange with each other.

Similarly, our gratitude must lead us to a life of active service in the world. Aware as we are of the great love God bears for us and for all of humankind, we cannot and must not stand idly by as others within our society are abused or forgotten. We cannot and must not stand idly by as violence and poverty stricken our world such that millions of people cannot fathom the love of God, because they have no experience of lasting nourishment or peace. We cannot and must not stand idly by, but must continue to be a community of active engagement and service that seeks to build up where society has torn down, so that others whom we will never know can begin to understand the great love that we and God possess for them.

These are the marks of our relationship to God. Gratitude. Affection. Service.
So allow me to conclude by returning to where we began, gratitude. Thank you!

Thank you for the great affection you have shown me and my family.

Thank you for the wonderful love and patience you have given to Sam and to Catherine as they squirm and run and play.

Thank you for the great support and care you have given to Jessica as she arrives, single-handedly wrangling two kids into church, or bears the far-to-frequent late nights of her Rector-husband.

Thank you also for your affection and trust which brought me here nearly three years ago, and for the generous patience and grace which you have given to me when I have stumbled and fallen, and as I have learned as a priest and fellow Christian in your midst.

Allow me also to thank Jessica, without whom none of this would be possible. She has born with me with grace and kindness, and I would want no one else at my side.

Thank you all for making the all-encompassing love of God, real and personal for me.

Thank you all for enfoldling my family and me into this wonderful community of affection.