

Sermon 25 April 2010
The Rev. Deacon Annie Fritschner
Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

Years and years ago in Connecticut, a friend of mine asked me to help her move her mother to a smaller apartment. I agreed (for some unknown reason, since I despise moving) and on the appointed day I arrived at her beautiful apartment which was the second floor of an old brownstone, with floor to ceiling windows and wonderful light. I entered the kitchen, then went into the living room, and then into the spare bedroom.

In this room were two huge pieces of furniture, a heavy oak armoire, and a king-sized bed with a heavy oak headboard and footboard. And on every surface, including piled on the floor, on top of the bed and the armoire, were plastic containers - margarine containers, cool whip, ice cream, cole slaw.... Not hundreds of them but thousands of them; years and years and years worth of plastic containers. Piled on the bed and covering every inch of the floor. If they were in the chancel you wouldn't be able to see altar and possibly not even the flame of the Pascal candle.

In one of my most graceless moments of life, I laughed. I was so startled - shocked really - I giggled like you do at a funeral or the most inappropriate place. My friend gave me a dirty look, and Louisa, her 70+ year old mom turned to me with the most innocent face and said, "Well, you never know when you're going to need a container." She had me there. You never know when you will.

As a Depression baby and as a scout, being prepared is a beautiful thing. Yet as a lamb of God holding onto empty things and behaviors is exactly what leads us astray from the Good Shepherd.

Today all our lessons have good - even great- news, and they are understandable! In Acts a disciple of Jesus' - that wonderfully flawed Peter whom we heard about last Sunday - raises Dorcas from the dead. That is great news for us, some of Jesus' other wonderfully flawed

disciples. Peter knelt and prayed; he humbled himself to God and prayed to become God's instrument of healing power.

In the psalm we are told we will receive rest, water, guidance, refreshment of our souls, and be kept safe from evil; we even will receive a banquet so full that our cups will be running over with sacred abundance. We are promised that we can live in the house of the Lord, in other words in God's presence forever.

Revelation reconfirms we will hunger and thirst no more and that God will guide us through the tricky parts of life and, when necessary, will wipe away our tears. And from the Book of John we are reminded that God knows us intimately and offers us eternal life.

*God knows us - just as we are - and calls us each by name.
God is and will always be with us so we never have to be alone.
God can fill all the empty places in our souls so we never have to hunger or thirst.
God will wipe away our tears.*

What more do we want? And why do we want more? What is the restlessness, the attraction of better, more, different, other than we are?

Clutching at emptiness while yearning to be closer to God are human responses to the fears and worries of this world; instead of reaching out for God and asking for help, sometimes we rationalize our self centered behaviors and call them home, normal, what we deserve, the ways things have always been done, maybe even tradition.

These behaviors become our own enslavement sometimes without even knowing we are no longer coping or managing but are being managed by whatever the "its" are; overeating, shopping, work, porn, gambling, drinking, worrying, collecting things. The "it" doesn't matter - the power of the enslavement to the "it" is what is real.

We are so hungry for the word of God that we overeat, and so thirsty from wandering in the wilderness alone that we drink too much, and

we yearn so deeply for the abundance of God's promises in our lives that we overshoot and rent storage space for all our extra stuff. And on and on surrounding ourselves physically, emotionally and spiritually with emptiness so vast that it becomes a barrier to knowing the Risen Christ in our daily lives.

Why do we clutch at our empty behaviors and things? Maybe it is to face our fears of living life on life's terms. But maybe it is to protect ourselves from the extravagant, persistent, unending, blinding love of God.

Well, it doesn't work. God calls us each by name anyway and knows our weaknesses and desires and shame and God still wants to dwell in us and have us dwell in Him.

God is calling us, "Hey hey hey; you know my voice and I know you. Here I am, come and follow me. Be my precious, beloved dependent child so I can feed you and satiate you and I can sing to you and I will love you wherever you are because I know your name and I know your heart and I will never leave you."

That is the covenant Christ makes with us. To love us thoroughly, always, without conditions. And this is scary, because we feel so unworthy.

I am not judging Louisa and her containers; I know what it is like to put things and behaviors between me and God. My empty containers were gin and vodka and scotch and bourbon bottles, and when I was "cutting back" wine bottles. My brothers and sisters in my church family, I am an alcoholic and an addict and it is important that you hear this from me, rather than from another source (so we can have private conversations about it if you want). I have been asked by Bishop Taylor to chair the new Diocesan Recovery Ministry, and among my church family I am breaking my anonymity in hopes that it might help another alcoholic who wants to get sober.

I started drinking on my 13th birthday and smoking the summer I was 14. And if any of you has ever tried to stop smoking and failed you know what addiction is. God willing and with help from others and by living one day at a time, this Labor day weekend I might have 21

years of sobriety and will begin a time of my life where I will have been sober longer than drunk. I gave up smoking 24 years ago.

God promises us true liberation in the love of Jesus Christ and we must choose it over our old and empty stale ways, and sometimes choose over and over and over in a single moment because the call away from Christ's liberating love towards enslavement - to our golden handcuffs - is so cunning, baffling and powerful.

If we need a margarine container, we will be given one. If we need help through the wreckage of our sinful ways, Jesus will guide us. If we need rest from torment, The Holy Spirit will lead us to a safe place to breathe. We will be given what we need - our daily bread.

God has given us the power to live in and with the Risen Christ if we choose it. Like Peter, we are invited to fall on our knees and pray for God to be the Good Shepherd of our lives that we may be the precious sheep of God's hands.

Amen.