

THE ABSOLUTE TRUTH ABOUT SECURITY AND POWER

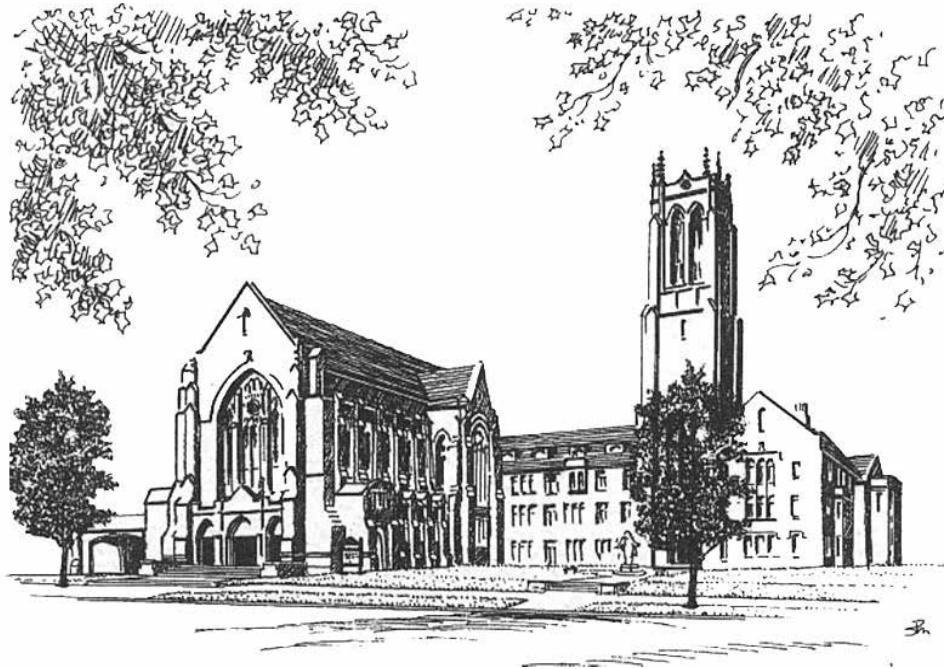
by

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

9:45 a.m.



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Texts: Acts 4:5-12 • Psalm 23 • 1 John 3:16-24 • John 10:11-18

This homily is about security and power. We all want to feel safe and adequate for life. It is a natural drive of the ego, both for individuals and for groups, to seek to be safe and powerful.

If the truth be told, and truth ought to told in a place like this; if the truth be told, the journey we are on is difficult, dangerous, and even deadly.

I know that is not pleasant to hear. However, the trip through life as a human being is made up things that are difficult, dangerous, and even deadly.

I remember the end of the first day of my first graduate seminar in clinical psychology, the professor said right before he walked out of the classroom, “Gentlemen,” there were no women in our class. “Gentlemen, if you are lucky, you will grow old, get sick and die. That’s if you are lucky. If you are not lucky, you will get hit by a truck or have some other catastrophic end. Have a nice day.” Then, he left.

If we decide consciously to make ours a spiritual journey, unless we pretty it up by letting the ego be in control, we discover that though it is correct to refer to the concept of God as “the Good Shepherd,” we are called and sometimes carried to and through places the ego simply doesn’t want to go.

I think one of the most important lessons I have learned in my life is that the Sacred is much more skilled in coming to us than we are in moving into the Sacred. Jesus said that the reality he referred to as “the rule of God” “is spread out all around you but you don’t see it. It seeks to come alive within you but you don’t allow it.”

Why is that? Why is it that individuals, that is us, and groups — groups of individuals frequently do much more damaging things than an individual might do alone — why is it that we are so attached to beliefs and behaviors that clearly don’t work, that make us miserable, that just seem to cause more trouble?

Charlotte was in hospice care. Though she was lucid, she knew the end was near. She asked her oldest daughter to go to the bank and get her jewelry box out of the safety box and bring it and her three other sisters to see her. The daughter did

so. Charlotte sat up in bed with her four daughters around her and her jewelry box in her lap. She opened it and began giving precious pieces of family history to her daughters.

“Here, Linda, this was your grandmother’s wedding band. She wanted you to have it.”

“Vicky, this broach was a gift from your father to me after he got a big promotion. He had a picture of you girls put in it and had it surrounded with pearls. He was so proud to surprise me with this. Make sure it stays in the family.”

“Pamela, this necklace with the emerald drop was a gift your father bought me on a romantic trip to Paris. You asked for it someday from the moment you saw it. That day has come.”

“Ellen, this is the diamond bracelet your dad surprised me with one Christmas when times were hard for us.”

On and on she went, handing out items until there was only one left. She began to close the jewelry box. Linda, the oldest, said, “But, mom, what about that?” pointing to the remaining piece.

Her mother snapped back, “That? I just got that. I’m keeping it for myself.”

That’s the illusion the ego falls for: that there is something we can do to stay in charge, to be in control, to run the show.

If you look at almost any of the conflicts that occupy the news media — all the way from ISIS, through the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to the various in-house squabbles that are taking place in churches today — they all have to do with the very legitimate and understandable desire that people have to feel safe and powerful. In the process, however, we can easily confuse personal preference for Divine Presence.

One of the ways to true security and power comes from having an image of God that creates us rather than defeats us. There is an absolute connection between how we see God and how we see ourselves and each other and, indeed, the whole world.

First of all let's begin with the fact that we can't conceive of God. Any God we could conceive of with our puny brains wouldn't be much of a God. Since God is inconceivable, I'm not sure why we have concepts of God, of the inconceivable. But, we do.

Two of my primary and important spiritual teachers over the past many years have significantly influenced my thinking on the matter of God, or Sacred Mystery, the term I prefer.

One has been Franciscan Friar Richard Rohr. He says, and I'm quoting here, "The word 'God' is first of all a stand-in for 'everything' — reality, truth, and the very shape of your universe."

This is why theology is important and why good theology and spirituality can make so much difference in how we live our daily lives. Theology is quite practical — practically upbuilding or practically defeating.

The second important spiritual teacher of mine has been James Finley. Finley entered the Gethsemani Monastery when he was 17. His spiritual director was Thomas Merton, and Finley became one of Merton's primary biographers. Finley left the monastery after many years to become a Buddhist and then, later, a psychologist. He has had a profound influence on my life.

I collect prayer beads and religious objects from all traditions and have for decades. Years ago I acquired one from the Middle East that is the most unusual one I have. It has a medallion at one end with a cross. Then five prayer beads at one end. At the other end, there are five more. The whole thing is almost a yard long.

Here is the function of this prayer bead set. You receive one of these in a special spiritual initiation ceremony. Your task and practice is to be able to put your entire theology, the one you really live by and not just numbly mumble in church on Sunday, into ten words and, then, use this set of prayer beads to help keep you focused. That was Finley's challenge to me: put your entire true theology into ten words, a prayer or affirmation of ten words.

I'll let you know at the end of this homily what I came up with. You'll be thinking about it.

As someone who has offered spiritual direction and teachings for years now, I can tell you that most people's operative understanding of God is some subtle combination of their mother and father and other early authority figures.

This is the God that many people give up on later in life. For most people God is a white guy who is sitting out there somewhere. When people get in a jam, when they have a loved one who grows old, gets sick and dies or has some catastrophic event occur and this God doesn't come and save the day, that God goes.

Very often people will tell me, "I don't believe in God."

My usual response is, "Tell me what God you don't believe in. I likely don't believe in that God either."

On the other side of the equation are people who have a God that needs defending. They have received the absolute truth from this God about territory or race or religious belief or sexual orientation or a work ethic or whatever temporal value they want to keep safe in their jewelry box and have taken it upon themselves to make sure that other people agree with them or suffer the consequences. That is what you see going on with ISIS today and it is the way the church behaved in the Crusades.

The God of these people is stingy, vengeful, highly controlling and treats you worse than your worst enemy would.

Such images are an unworkable basis for any real spirituality, and they lead to woefully inadequate, even dangerous, attempts to create and experience security and power. That's what this homily is about, remember — true security and power.

One of the things it means to be a follower of Jesus is to follow him into his understanding of God. The two key words that describe that understanding, that faith, that way of living are forgiveness and inclusion. Rather than an old man sitting on a throne, the God of Jesus was more like a loving parent who runs toward us while we are still a long way off, more like someone who sees us lying beside the road, beaten and left for dead, and who tends to our wounds and takes care of us, or, like the images that run through all the lectionary readings for today, like a good shepherd who cares for the sheep in his care as if each one were the only one.

You see real security, real power reflected in the first lesson today when Peter and John, confronted by the controlling religious establishment proclaim that the healing power of God is available to everybody. They do this confidently from the confines of prison not knowing whether the consequences of their acts would cost them their lives or not.

The second lesson clearly says that right practice is more important than right belief. The Gospel is all about inclusion. Then there is the Psalm for today, which you will hear sung.

Likely, if you had any religious instruction as a child, you were made to or encouraged to memorize this passage of Scripture.

There is a story about a Sunday School teacher who decided to have her young class memorize this Psalm, the 23rd Psalm. She gave the youngsters a month to learn the it. Little Ricky was excited about the task, but it was hard for him. After much practice, he finally got it down though.

On the day that the kids were scheduled to recite Psalm 23 in front of the congregation, Ricky was so nervous. When it was his turn, he stepped up to the microphone and stood there overcome with stage fright. All of his hard work simply evaporated. His mind went blank. Finally, he screwed up his courage and said, “The Lord is my Shepherd, and that’s all I need to know.”

When we move away from immature, low-level religion we find that there is less need to know and more need simply to be known.

I have immersed myself in Jesus and his teachings for the past 30 years. My experience has been that of being confronted with a much bigger picture than I had first received. The realm of reality Jesus referred to as “the kingdom of God” has the power to deconstruct our false and smaller kingdoms.

If you want true security and power, open your hearts and minds to being converted to a world of grace. Be attracted by Jesus’ gracious invitation into the world of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Be done with religion that is filled with shame, guilt, and fear. The reason some religions use these things is that they work quickly, but they don’t give you real security or power.

There is in the realm that Jesus invites us into deep healing, true security, real power.

Jesus said that the truth would set us free. I believe that. I think, however, that first the truth makes us uncomfortable. The truth confronts us with the false ways we have tried to gain security and power, to hold on to what we consider our precious pieces of personal jewelry.

The ten word prayer/affirmation I came up with was this:

God, me safe within you.

God, you alive within me.

The concept of God as the Good, Safe, and Caring Shepherd is all we need to know for true security and power.

That frees us up to go from here loving each other and all others as God loves us.

We can go from here to be God's people in the world, secure and powerful in that faith.

Most Sunday sermons also are available via the church website, www.stpaulshouston.org, as well as pre-printed and on CD. Access the sermons on the website via either the Worship section or the Media Center. The pre-printed sermons are in the information rack at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeyer at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.