"Who Do You Love?"
A Sermon delivered by Rev. John Balicki
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine
Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 11, 2025

Rarely promise, but, if lawful, constantly perform. - William Penn

The best way to keep one's word is not to give it. - Napoleon Bonaparte

Ah but Napoleon, sometimes they make you stand up and promise - Promises, so easy to make, so hard to keep. For those who have exchanged marriage vows: *to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until we are parted by death,* it can roll off the tongue so easily in your twenties but somewhere down the road the hard work begins to live it out. Or the promise to uphold the Constitution of the United States made by Federal employees, Representatives, Senators, judges, political appointees, the President and Vice President of the United States. So easy to say until it conflicts with something you want to do or makes your job harder. But hey it's easy to dump on all those people, I asked all of you to make a promise this morning. Did you think twice about it? Did you look at it and say? Nope, can't do that one. Promise? What Promise?

Today was the third of seven individual promises throughout the Easter Season related to our baptismal promises. Our question of the morning states:

"Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as yourself?

Warning: This one is really hard on many levels. It has multiple dimensions to it, let's explore. First note the two verbs, "seek" and "serve". They imply effort. They mean we aren't just decent to the people who penetrate our defenses and we simply can't avoid. They mean we do some work to go out and look for people so we can find Christ in them and serve them. This is where the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, which we always encounter on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, comes into play. The shepherd doesn't just take care of the sheep that cooperatively come back to the sheepfold. The shepherd seeks out that which is lost, leaving the 99 behind to find the one lost – one of the shortest but most meaningful of all the parables of Jesus. So to seek implies that as baptized people we do "Mission and Outreach" to use a popular church term. We may seek to serve in foreign or exotic lands or we may do it right here in our own

community. And when we find, we serve: food pantries, outreach to those living in poverty, to those suffering any kind of abuse, to the addicted. We can find ways to seek and strive on our own or we can do it together as church community or civic community but our baptismal promise says it is not an option, a nice add-on if we have a little spare time in our lives and need something to do.

And then there is that little adjective "all". We serve Christ in **all** persons – not just those who are friendly, educated, have good boundaries and acceptable personal hygiene – not just those we like or who are like us – but all. In January our newly elected Vice-President, a recent convert to Roman Catholicism, began to publically espouse a concept of *ordo amoris* or "order of love" which basically says, "[Y]ou love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then, after that, you can focus and prioritize the rest of the world" essentially a hierarchy in our priorities for loving. In response to this, Pope Francis wrote a letter to all the American Roman Catholic bishops and in it he said.

"Christian love is not a concentric expansion of interests that little by little extend to other persons and groups…. The true ordo amoris *that must be promoted is that which we discover by…meditating on the love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception."*

"I exhort all the faithful of the Catholic Church, and all men and women of good will, not to give in to narratives that discriminate against and cause unnecessary suffering to our migrant and refugee brothers and sisters."

Following up, the newly elected Pope Leo XIV, at that time Cardinal Prevost, in supporting Pope Francis' letter said "Jesus doesn't ask us to rank our love for others".

Or if you want the Cliff Notes version, in one of my favorite quotes of all time, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "What part of **all** don't you understand?". And while this argument has very important political implications, it is more important to us as followers of Jesus. We say these baptismal promises through the Easter season because they are the essence of our faith – for those already baptized, they are a reminder of how to live and for anyone new to the faith or not baptized, they are the lessons to learn. Putting faith into practice. And that's hard, hard, hard. There are people I don't want to love. There are people I would rather exclude.

In today's gospel Jesus says. "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me" They follow me – they live as I instruct them". That's what these promises are – the living out of the teachings of Jesus. But to follow him we have to be listening to the right voices. What is our input like? There are all the voices of the outside world that might feed our biases and prejudices and make us hearken for a world as we think it should be but never was. And then there are many voices that tell us how to grow closer to God: by having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a higher level of morality. By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. And that's why being a member of a church community, participating in the Sunday liturgy, maintaining a life of prayer, being part of a community is so important. Because as our belonging is strengthened, we hopefully tune in to the Shepherd's voice a little better. H. King Oehmig says it this way

The Gospel message today should not be dulled down: Abandon your life to the Model Shepherd who is God. Even if it happens by inches, keep at it. Turn over the direction of your life and will to the Beautiful Shepherd each and every day, and trust that the prayer will be answered in ways beyond anything you can ask for or imagine. You will stumble and fall. By God's grace, get back up. Surrender, again and again. And listen for the Voice. Make room for the Voice, be present with ears to hear. Practice this daily. Lose your life little by little, and in doing so, find your life. And finally, when it comes time to make that last passage through the valley of the shadow of death, chances are good that, along the way, you will find a peace that passes all understanding. The fear of evil will leave you. Having trusted the Good Shepherd daily to keep you faithful, you will find him trustworthy with things eternal.