

Love in Action

B Easter 4--1 John 3:16-4, John 10:11-18

My favorite radio show, *This American Life*, did an episode recently called "This I Used to Believe."ⁱ One of the segments featured a woman who had believed in God until her close friend, at thirty-two years old, died suddenly of cancer. After that, she just couldn't accept that a divine being would will such a thing to happen to this good, generous, loving person. Well the woman ended up contacting this Christian, high school football coach who had made national news for instructing half of his team's fans to cheer for the other side in a game they played against a boys' juvenile penitentiary. You may have heard about it. It was really quite a great story: these disadvantaged kids with no family or friends present at the game, talking about how incredible it was to hear their names cheered by all these people they didn't even know.

So anyway, the woman whose friend had died and the football coach ended up having a phone conversation. In that conversation, the woman kept talking about how she could not reconcile her friend's death with a loving God, and the coach kept presenting arguments for why the God of the Bible exists. To his credit, he didn't suggest that her friend was being punished for something she did. But he did say, in a sort of lecturing, Al Gore tone of voice, that the world's evils stemmed from human sin, going back to Adam, and our job was to gain eternal life by believing in Jesus.

In other words, the woman was speaking out of a traumatic experience and the emotions it stirred in her--abandonment, loss, meaninglessness, confusion. And the coach was responding with a set of mental concepts. She was sharing from a wounded

heart. But rather than meet her with his own vulnerable heart and risk truly receiving her darkness, he was answering from an intellectually defended head. It was almost as if her suffering were a threat to his sense of safety, so he ran away from it, ran and hid inside his cheap assurances, leaving her alone in her grief and confusion. I have to say, the whole conversation made me wince. I felt like yelling at the radio, "Don't listen to him. Talk to someone with a mature theology and some pastoral skill!"

But this story has cast a new light for me on Jesus' contrast between the good shepherd and the hired hand in today's gospel. The good shepherd stays with the sheep and faces the wolf with them, even to the point of laying down his life. And not only that, but the gospel story emphasizes that the good shepherd "knows" the sheep, and they, in turn, "listen to his voice." His connection to the sheep arises out of a relationship of listening. The hired hand, by contrast, "leaves the sheep and runs away" in the face of a threat. In the Bible, this hired-hand image goes all the way back to the prophets of the Old Testament where, as here, it refers to corrupt religious leaders that have led Israel astray by being more concerned with their own agenda than with the well-being of their sheep. And in some ways, so it is with that football coach. He is a sort of contemporary version of the hired hand. He has become too caught up in his own agenda of getting her saved, almost as if she has become an object to him. He has refused to truly "know" the woman in her anguish. He has "run away" from the wolves of uncertainty and doubt and sorrow that are threatening her because he is afraid to face them in himself.

And who can blame him, really? Who wouldn't prefer to cling to a simple, happy worldview than to offer true companionship to those struggling with darkness and doubt? Who wouldn't prefer to run away and ignore than to stay and listen? Because to stay and

listen forces us to face the mystery of what we do not know. We do not know why good people die young from cancer. We do not know why the world we call God's creation is filled with so much innocent suffering and random tragedy. Our belief in God itself is perhaps more of a shadowy intuition, a groping through the dark toward one whose presence we sense, than it is a set of watertight theological assurances. And admitting this, admitting to all the answers we do *not* have, is scary.

But it is also liberating. I believe it is the first step towards being remade in the image of the good shepherd, who stays with the sheep in their most threatened hour, who knows them and is grounded with them in a relationship of listening, who does not run away from their darkness and confusion. That, after all, is our calling. We all have the cowardly hired hand within us. He is not the sole property of evangelical football coaches. But we also have the potential to be the good shepherd to one another. And God draws that potential out of us when we stop claiming answers we don't really have, and instead stand authentically and faithfully in the uncertainty and the mystery. God draws that potential out of us when we stop running away into our arguments and proclamations and explanations and instead really listen. God draws that potential out of us when we let go of the false security of easy answers, and become companions to one another in our deepest doubts and our darkest moments. And so, in the words of today's reading from First John, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

ⁱ Episode #378, originally broadcast 4/20/2009, accessed online at http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?sched=1292.