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A number of years ago, I was hosting a pastor from El Salvador as he visited his U.S. sister parish. He asked me about parish life, what brought people together and what kinds of conflicts U.S. parishes might have. I told him that in that particular parish, the great unifiers were support of its school and a local and international commitment to work for justice.

Nevertheless, I had to admit that we were in the midst of some liturgical controversy. Some leaders had asked parishioners to bake Communion bread. A few people reported to the bishop that the recipe was illegal because it included honey. Suddenly, lots of people were angry. Hearing that, the pastor shook his head and said, "The recipe police allow the devil to go drinking and dancing because they are doing his work so well!"

Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Acts 13:14, 43-52

Psalm 100

Revelation 7:9, 14b-17

John 10:27-30

Today, Acts tells us that Paul and Barnabas had great success preaching in synagogues until some of the "old guard" got jealous. While the disciples urged people to remain faithful to God's grace, each side had a settled opinion about what that meant. Paul and Barnabas went a bit overboard by denouncing the Jews who could not accept Jesus and loudly lauding the Gentiles who did. Then, some influential matrons and leaders got the disciples banished.

Although Luke may not have intended it, this story depicts divisive attitudes and actions on the part of both parties, enough so that the devil probably found time for a nap or two. Our readings from John and Revelation offer commentary on this drama and what Paul and Barnabas still needed to learn.

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, "Good Shepherd Sunday," always focuses on Christ, the pastor of all creation. Today's Gospel makes up in depth what it lacks in length.

The first verse tells us that Jesus' own hear and follow him. In this context, hearing means paying serious attention, allowing a message to move our heart like music moves our feet, allowing it to get deeply into us. Thus, Jesus could claim that those who hear him, follow him. Imbibing his message, they recognize it as so life-giving that any other option seems senseless.

When Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and no one can take them away," he's saying that hearing and following induct us into his own life, including his imperishable relationship to the Father. This reiterates John's basic message: We are made for union with God and one another, and when we enter into that, nothing can destroy it.

Revelation records how John the visionary saw a future innumerable multitude "from every nation, race, people and tongue." These are people who have remained faithful in times of trial and tribulation, something that would be impossible without an enduring relationship with God. People like this make the devil weep with frustration.

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The problem of the religious leaders depicted in Acts was that of risking openness to more than they already knew, of taking in information that challenged cherished beliefs. They're not hard to understand. In this age of fake news and opposing theologies, how are we to know what comes from God and what impedes God's reign in our midst?

Today's incident from Acts illustrates how jealousy and dogmatism fomented divisions that lasted for millennia. Throughout history, people of many beliefs have feared ideas about God that are bigger than their theologies. Revelation's message depicts how God's love extends to every nation, race, people and tongue. Jesus' claim to be humanity's shepherd reminds us that one denomination or tradition cannot claim exclusive rights to hearing God's voice. Jesus said it in John 10:16: "I have other sheep not of this fold ... they will hear my voice and there will be one flock, one shepherd." After Vatican II, we've begun to learn enough humility to recognize that God speaks in a variety of ways to people of goodwill over all of Earth.

The 50 days of Easter give us time to move ever more deeply into being people of the Resurrection. As we do that, we ask to discern if something is from God. Today's readings offer us some criteria. Acts tells us to ask if the new idea or movement brings us the joy of the Spirit or meanness of heart. Revelation suggests that the proof comes from whether the new thing builds a world where there is no more hunger or thirst or favors one group over others.

The Gospel tells us that what is of God will always draw us toward greater unity among all people and creation and of all in God. Follow these criteria, and we can put the devil in checkmate.

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