

Follow The Leader

John 10:11-18

May 3, 2009

I.

I will begin today with a brief story about a farmer who came to the side of a river, and saw another farmer standing on the other side. The first farmer shouted, "How do I get to the other side?" The second farmer thought a minute and replied, "You're already on the other side."

Sometimes things are a matter of perspective, aren't they? Today's gospel reading might be understood in different ways. Jesus said he is the good shepherd. Did he mean he is a "good" shepherd, to be distinguished from someone else who might be a "bad" shepherd? Or did he mean he was a good "shepherd," as distinguished from being a good "something else?"

And we don't even have to separate the two words to still have alternate interpretations. Perhaps we might start by asking who Jesus is, and the answer is that he is the good shepherd. Or we might wonder who could be the good shepherd, and the answer is Jesus.

Today's readings tell us that all of the above are correct. The Collect of the Day proclaims that Jesus is the good shepherd of God's people, and asks that we hear him, know him, and follow him. The twenty-third psalm begins with our eternal declaration that the Lord is my shepherd. And the gospel sums it all up. We belong to Jesus. We are his sheep. We know him and he knows us. He speaks to us and we listen to him. He leads and we follow.

Jesus' self-identification as the good shepherd is all-inclusive. It embraces his relationship with God, his relationship with humanity, and our relationship with God through him. Nothing is left out. All of it is important any way you look at it. None of the different perspectives minimize or exclude the significance of Jesus Christ in our lives.

II.

And obviously there are some metaphorical aspects to what Jesus said. He was not literally stating his occupation when he said he is the good shepherd. Tradition tells us that he was a carpenter as a young man. Later he was called "rabbi" and "teacher." And in the largest sense he was the prophetic revelation of the messiah.

In fact, the term "good shepherd" is one of the many ways in which Jesus symbolically described himself, especially in John's gospel. We might recall that he also said he was the bread of life (6:35), and the light of the world (8:12), and the resurrection and the life (11:23-25), and the way, the truth, and the life (14:5-6). Next week he will describe himself as the vine (15:1, 5).

And today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, also is known as "Good Shepherd Sunday," not only because of today's gospel reading but also because of last year's reading at this time as well as next year's fourth Sunday reading. Last year Jesus said he is the gate for the sheep, and whoever enters through him will be saved (10:7, 9). Next year he will tell us that his sheep hear his voice and follow him, and he gives them eternal life (10:27-28).

III.

Do we start to see a pattern here? There seem to be a lot of sheep around. And we can look throughout the Bible to see that images of sheep and shepherds play important roles in biblical teachings and in the life of the church.

Why is that? To some extent it's because sheep and shepherds were prevalent in first century Jewish Palestine. But there also were a lot of cattle. Jesus was born in a manger used by

cattle. And in those days a person's wealth frequently was measured by the number of cattle he owned. So why did sheep end up as one of the symbols for humanity?

Many years ago I grew up on a farm. From before I was in the first grade until I left for college my family raised cattle, sheep, and hogs. And at college I majored in agriculture before I went to law school. I even took a course in sheep production.

And I can tell you from first hand experience, sheep were the worst. They were stupid, stubborn, mindless, smelly, dirty, near-sighted, got lost easily, and couldn't even find their own way into the barn. They took the most work, and produced the least profit.

But yet there are far more references to sheep in the Bible than to cattle or other animals. Except for the idolatry of the golden calf can you think of any important biblical events where the moral of the story somehow involved cattle? And it's easier to imagine Jesus as the good shepherd rather than as the good cowboy, isn't it?

I sometimes wonder if God actually looks at us as if we were sheep. Going back to my earlier question, is that why biblical stories about animals often involve sheep? Is it because these characteristics of sheep lend themselves to descriptions of Jesus' teachings to us and our relationship with God?

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, things sometimes can be matters of perspective. I don't think God regards us in all the negative ways in which I think about sheep. Rather, it's more about our relationship with God and the teachings Jesus gave us. These metaphors about sheep in the gospels characterize important elements of our faith rather than unpleasant personal qualities. We are not stupid, or mindless, or dirty, or smelly, for example.

We can, however, be stubborn, and we do get lost from time to time. And we can be wayward and stray. If one or two of us start to go in the wrong direction, some of the rest of us might not be far behind. Even though we are individuals, we can have a tendency to follow the crowd as it seeks material and worldly things.

So in this sense we share some of the characteristics of sheep. We need someone to look out for us and lead us in the paths of righteousness. We need someone to help us find greener pastures that we simply cannot find on our own. And when the wolves come, in whatever form they actually take, we need someone to protect us. That's what a shepherd does for real sheep, and it's what Jesus does for us.

And this idea probably has been woven through many sermons I have preached. Think of all the times I have spoken about how Jesus cared for the needy. Or how he asks us to come to him because his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Or how he can calm the storms in our lives. Again, even though the background in those stories are different, his love for us is the same. He always serves us as a shepherd serves the sheep.

IV.

So what does this all mean for us today? What does it mean to live as part of Jesus' one flock as we worship here at St. Thomas? How do we manifest that identity to each other, and to the community? I think we might consider two things.

The first is to listen for our shepherd's voice, which comes to us through the Holy Spirit, and to believe that he died for us in this world so that we could live with him forever in the next world. The second thing is that as his sheep we are called to follow him every day, and to do the good works that come from a sincere faith in him.

But listening is not always easy, and following can be even harder. The daily background noise and static that commands our attention can distract us from hearing what our Lord wants us to hear, and the pace of contemporary life can divert us from doing what he wants us to do.

Sometimes we cannot hear that small still voice within us without a spiritual hearing aid. Or we can be just sitting there with the remote and surfing the channels of life without really paying much attention. Perhaps our schedules and day planners become filled with too much of our own agendas and not enough of what God calls us to do. And maybe it's a matter of perspective. Like the farmer at the beginning of this sermon, sometimes we can wonder how to get to the other side of the river without realizing that we might already be there.

But through prayer, spiritual disciplines, worship, and participating in our common life together here at St. Thomas we can more clearly hear our shepherd's voice. We can adjust our hearing aids to filter out the noises that draw us too much into the secular world, and we can use the remote to pick the channels that carry the Lord's programs, so to speak.

This reminds me of the TV ad where two consultants were sitting at a table with a company president. The consultants had just presented a plan to help the company grow, and the president said, "That sounds great, let's do it." Looks of uncertainty come over the consultants' faces, and one of them tentatively responded, "Oh, we don't actually do anything, we just give advice."

Jesus is more than just a consultant. He does more than just offer advice. As the revelation of God on earth he died to save his sheep, and he rose from the dead to serve his sheep. And today he still loves us, lives in our hearts, hears our prayers, and is the source of our spirituality. As they say in the Mastercard ad, that is priceless.

V.

So as we leave here today, I pray that we can ask ourselves, what is going on at this time in our lives, in May of 2009, that we can leave at foot of cross? What burdens are we dealing with that can we give to Jesus, knowing that he is indeed the good shepherd? What is there in our lives that Jesus wants to take care of for us?

He is the good shepherd, and that means that we never are alone. In the best of times we thank him, and in the worst of times we can call on him. No matter what we do or need he will be there for us. And if we are in his flock we know that we will never be lost. *Amen.*