

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 3, 2009
The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"Jesus, The Good Shepherd"

Text: John 10:11-16 (Gospel Reading, NRSV)

Our sermon text this morning includes all of the Gospel reading, plus a few other verses. It has to do with sheep. In a famous "sheep sermon" delivered many years ago from the pulpit of Holy Cross Church, Valle Crucis, the Rev. Welch Tester had the following to say: "Sheep are dirty, smelly, stupid animals, and if you think it's romantic for Jesus to compare us to them, you are sadly mistaken!" It seems that as a farm boy turned priest and conference center director, Welch had some different ideas to offer about sheep!

All too often, it is easy for us to romanticize, fantasize and glamorize religious imagery. How true this is regarding the use of the word "shepherd." This is partly due to the fact that for many people one of their most favorite selections of Scripture is the 23rd Psalm. We often sing hymns that are a paraphrase of this psalm that are typical of what we do with imagery. They conjure up in each person's mind a very special relationship with God that is very warm and comforting instead of "smelly" and "dirty." For example, who could resist being led through "streams of living water, ...where the verdant pastures grow?" Who among us would turn down "celestial food?" [By the way, I had to look up "verdant." It means "Green, as in covered with fresh vegetation." It can also mean "unsophisticated, as in raw or inexperienced."]

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus is talking to his disciples, using this imagery of the shepherd, the sheep and the sheepfold. They were about as green, raw and unsophisticated as you could find. In verse six of this same chapter we are told that "*they did not understand what he was saying to them.*" Not only was this true of the disciples, but I believe that it is equally true of us today. It is necessary to understand what Jesus is saying, not from a sentimental point of view but honestly and clearly so that we can appreciate the imagery in all its richness and in the proper context.

Jesus starts by explaining that there is a difference in shepherds. There are good ones and bad ones. There are faithful shepherds and unfaithful. He makes it perfectly clear that he sees himself as a good and faithful shepherd. For example, a good shepherd in Jesus' day would not stand behind the sheep and cruelly drive them with a rod, or big stick; instead he was out front leading them. He knew that all beings were created with a certain amount of freedom, even dumb sheep, so he tried to provide for his flock by example, by leading them so that they would by their own choice follow him. Stupid as they were, they would not have to be driven! In that sense we human beings are no different than sheep. The choice must always be ours, and Jesus the good shepherd knew this.

It was also expected that the shepherd would take care of the flock. The owners hired shepherds in order to place their sheep under good care and

protection. If something happened to one or more of the sheep, the shepherd was expected to show proof that he had not been derelict. Even today in modern Israel, the shepherd will physically lay down in front of the gate at night to prevent the sheep from leaving and becoming lost.

In the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 15, Jesus tells several parables about the different ways that a sheep can be lost. One of the best known is about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep in his charge and one got lost. He leaves the ninety-nine and goes in search of the lost sheep until it is found. He then rejoices and calls his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him. Imagine having a party after everyone who gets lost is found!

Most of us have never raised or tended sheep. However, most of us have had the experience of temporarily losing a pet or some other animal. We can easily recall the feelings of anguish upon discovery that a dog had strayed, or a cat had stayed out several nights. What a feeling of relief when our pet comes home! What we thought might be dead was alive and it must be to some degree what a shepherd would experience when he found a lost sheep.

One would think that's the toughest part of being a good shepherd, waiting for the lost to return, but listen to the words of Jesus as he goes even further. "*I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*" I confess to you that in spite of all that I have learned about being a priest during the past 41 years, and in spite of what's going on in my body now, suffering and sacrifice are *not* my ideas of how to live the good life! Yet this is exactly what Jesus chose to do. It was a gift freely given by Jesus to each one of us so that we might know how much God really cares for us and loves us. This is a gift we have neither earned nor are worthy of receiving. Yet he did it for us. Our good shepherd was obedient to his own law of love.

According to all the Gospel writers, Jesus recognized throughout his ministry that there always loomed the possibility of the cross and that sooner or later he might *really* have to lay down his life for the sheep. Personally, I am sure that he hoped that the supreme sacrifice would never be necessary. I also wonder if he had doubts about his own resurrection? It would certainly be true to his human side. But perhaps it really doesn't matter. The fact is that he was true to his calling as a good shepherd; he had complete faith and trust in God, his shepherd in heaven.

Jesus also makes it abundantly clear that it is *his choice* in laying down his life. God has neither demanded it nor has God forced it on Jesus. Rather Jesus, of his own volition, has chosen the course he would follow. With or without reservation, he voluntarily laid down his life for his sheep. He was true to his own word and teaching. As good shepherds of God's way we try to do the same.

Years ago, just after I was diagnosed with leukemia, a young church member said to me with tears in his eyes, "Let me know, Barry, if there is anything I can do for you. *I will even lay down my life for you!*" I was deeply touched! I am sure this offer was made in all sincerity, with both the words of Jesus and my disease in mind. But I honestly don't know if I have ever been willing to do that for someone else, have you?

Now we could end it all right there. "The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never; I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever." It's a nice thought. It's a beautiful, romantic image that is still meaningful today. Jesus, the Good Shepherd. But like Welch Tester's sermon, it doesn't end that way. Typical of much of the Gospel, there are some hard, dirty questions to be asked. For example, how can we, the members of Christ Church, be better shepherds? For whom, and how, are we ready and willing to lay down our lives? How can we be better sheep? What are the ways in which we are called to follow? Can we be both sheep and shepherd as we try to find the lost Episcopalians of Allegany County, yea, even those who don't yet know they are lost?

Hard questions, but at least one answer can be found in the point made by an old nursery rhyme. It's the one called "Baa, baa, black sheep." I suppose it's not really politically correct to use it anymore because of the negative image imposed upon it by decades of racism. But there it is anyway, making the same point that Jesus made - the black sheep shared its wool, and its wool was its life. It laid down its wool that others might have warmth and life. As a stupid, dirty sheep, it could do no less. Can we?