

Sermon for 29 April 2012
Good Shepherd Sunday

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"I am the Good Shepherd; I know mine, and mine know me."

We often think of a smiling Jesus beneath a tree surrounded by doting sheep and lambs. An image of safety and peace. Indeed the idea of being shepherded safely is attractive, and part of the Good News of life in Christ, but that is not all that is here.

Jesus was talking to the religious leaders of his day. They had just accused him of being a devil because he healed a blind man on the Sabbath. Jesus responds by saying that a good shepherd, unlike a hired hand who leaves as soon as he is paid, stays with his sheep. The hand will not hang around in danger, it's not worth the pay! The Good shepherd will fight for them at risk to his own life.

For thousands of years, the Jewish people had used the Good Shepherd image for God. It goes all the way back to Genesis 49:24, which says that Joseph was saved "By the power of the mighty one of Jacob, by the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, the God of your father ...". Such imagery was used by Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekial, Amos, Zeccariah, and by David in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

It was clear to all those listening what Jesus meant — he was claiming to be like God. They also knew he was contrasting himself to them — the hired hands entrusted to care for God's people, but caring only for themselves.

In this context of a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, the Gospel fits with the other readings. "Leaders of the people, elders! We heal in the name of Jesus, whom you crucified ... the stone rejected by you the builders which has become the cornerstone." Peter says in Acts.

He warned the people not to follow the example of the Pharisees. Instead, he offered them someone else to follow — the Good Shepherd.

The shepherd image comes up again after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus and his apostles had just finished a breakfast of fish and bread on the shore of Lake Tiberius, Jesus wants to teach Peter, and us, about being a good shepherd himself. When Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord. You know I love you." Then Jesus said, "Herd my lambs." Really? No, Jesus didn't say, "Herd my lambs.?" Well, what did he say? "Feed my lambs!" Yes, there *is* a difference, isn't there?

A second time, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" And a second time Peter answered, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you!" And Jesus said, "Drive my sheep." ... What? He didn't say that either? No. He said, "Look after my sheep. Tend my sheep."

Then yet a third time, Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. Peter, perhaps anxious about three question on his love of Jesus, said, "Lord, you know everything. You know I love you."

Then Jesus said, "Keep my sheep in line, and for goodness sake, make sure none of them have any fun!" No. Not that, but, "Feed my sheep." ...

"Feed my sheep." That sounds like the job of a *servant*! Jesus wanted Peter to think, "Is that what I'm supposed to be — your servant?"

That's *exactly* what a Christian leader is supposed to be. That's why Jesus washed the feet of his apostles — to set an example of ministry for the shepherds that would come after him.

Jesus was talking about the daily hard work of caring, worrying, visiting, outreach, social justice, feeding unattractive hungry people, talking to Diocesan staff, writing sermons and so kind of ministry. Unfortunately, some religious leaders today are not shepherds, but hirelings, only in it for the money ... and the car, and the house, and the retirement, and the health benefits, and the vacations, and the idea that you only work one day a week.

A shepherd in those days didn't walk behind the flock beating them with a stick to keep them moving. He walked in front of them, seeking out a safe path to food and water and shelter. The sheep followed him, because they recognized his voice, and they trusted him. Jesus tells us that's the kind of Good Shepherd he is. He leads, and we follow.

It is worth remembering that St. Peter never got up and said, "My name is Peter. I'm your new shepherd. You just follow me and do what I say, and you'll be fine." No! Instead, he said, "That Jesus whom you crucified, He is the one you must follow."

We only follow Peter, or any other Saint, teacher, priest, fellow church member because she or he is following Jesus too, and pointing to him, and we happen to be going the same way.

That's the way it is with people who, as Christians should be, are followers of Jesus, members of his flock. We are all called to have a little shepherd in us. If one of us falls, the rest of us stop and pick him up and put him on our shoulders. If one of us strays, the rest call out and point the way (as best we know it). But we don't follow each other. Together, we follow Jesus, for there is but one flock, and one Shepherd.

As we grow on our faith, we become more like Jesus the shepherd. As we are cared for, so we care for others, as we follow Jesus, so we learn to lead others that way, as we are served, so we serve. As Jesus gave himself away, over and over again, so we give ourselves away. All for the sake of love.

And God, who knows all things, holds you ever more firmly in love as you let go of yourself for him.

Follow the Good Shepherds, be one too