

The Fourth Sunday of Easter Year A
Good Shepherd Sunday
13 April 2008

[Acts 2:42-47](#)

[Psalm 23](#)

[1 Peter 2:19-25](#)

[John 10:1-10](#)

This is not the usual sermon from me, your Deacon. You see Deacons are called among you to interpret the needs, concerns and hopes of the world. Priests, on the other hand, are called to be pastors to you. That's why Deacons' sermons are usually more focused on what's going on outside the doors of the Church and priests on what's happening inside. But the preaching schedule and the Lectionary have conspired to give you a Deacon preaching a pastor's passage.

So I'll do my best to focus on you today—because today's focus is on you. Or really, on you and Jesus. This Fourth Sunday of Easter we name Good Shepherd Sunday and each year we ponder over a portion of Jesus' claim to be our Good Shepherd in John chapter 10. This year, Year A (according to the Lectionary) we read the opening ten verses of the Good Shepherd passage. Jesus has just left the Temple, where he's healed a man born blind, and confronted the Pharisees with the claim that “before Abraham was, I am,” a claim no easier for unbelievers to accept then than it is now.

And now he tries to explain himself. Only he does his usual job of confusing his audience, so he stops his story-telling and starts all over again.

He describes a sheepfold, which is really just a patch of ground, surrounded by a piled rock wall, where, at night, safe from predators, thieves and bandits, a flock and its shepherd can settle down to rest. He tells his audience that anyone who clambers over that wall is not a real shepherd, but a thief. The real shepherd comes in through the gate, and the sheep nuzzle around him. He calls them by name, Spot, Rover, Blackie, or whatever is fashionable among shepherds naming their sheep. And they know that voice. It's the one who leads them to green pastures, by still waters. The one who makes sure that they eat, that they are warm, that they are protected.

His audience looks at him quizzically. So he forgets the whole metaphor thing and says, “Look, I'm the gate. I'm the one who leads you into safety and out to the pasture. Everybody else who claims to lead you to God is simply a fake, a thief, a plunderer. Listen to my voice and you're going to live abundantly.”

That was nearly as impossible to believe as his earlier story about being around before Abraham. But that's because the sheep were being led around by shepherds who were little more than bandits. They were not bandits because they came teaching some false religion. The revelation to Moses, Jeremiah and Ezra was not false. In fact, these religious bandits were perfectly orthodox.

They kept the Law, and made sure the Temple was free of undesirables like lepers, blind beggars, and Gentiles. Women were kept at a safe distance from the altar, lest a drop of female blood should pollute its all-male holiness. The Torah was read, the prayers were kept, the sacrifices offered. They never missed an opportunity to remind people how sinful they were and how much they needed the orthodox leaders to get their prayers through to God. You see, a lack of orthodoxy was not what the Scribes and Pharisees into religious bandits.

Nor was it a lack of clarity in theology that rendered them thieves. They made sure that the Law was clear, even if it meant that prophets had to die from time to time. It was better for one man to die than for a whole nation to suffer.

What made them the plunderers of the flock was their unquenchable desire to stand between the people and God. They were right and everyone else was wrong. But there was Jesus, wagging that old prophet's finger, and proclaiming, "Hang on, boys! Who made you the gatekeepers of God? There's only one way into the sheepfold and it's not through the Temple. It's through me. And only the people who hear that are the ones who find real, abundant life."

The religious elite was clear, firm, faithful and orthodox. They stood on two millennia of Hebrew teaching and tradition. And along comes this son-of-a-carpenter, spinning tall tales and unfathomable riddles who says that all their clear teaching is leading people to danger. His impossible to understand stories were what you had to hear to grasp onto real life. Like this one about the sheepfold and its gate. Everyone knew that sheepfolds don't even have gates. They just have an opening, a couple feet wide—just wide enough for a sheep to slip through. And the shepherd himself lies down at night across that opening, his very body serving as the gate, to keep the sheep in, to keep the intruders out.

Ironically, it was voice speaking the unclear teaching, the ambiguous theology, the uncomfortable muddling that revealed the real shepherd. The shepherd was the gate. The gate was the shepherd. There's a lesson in this for God's people today, and it's not unclear, ambiguous or muddled in the least.

A lot of would-be shepherds take pride in their orthodoxy. They paint themselves in it, to try to disguise their thieving eyes. They will stop at nothing to split churches, denominations, world-wide communions, all in the name of purity. They will separate families and friends, ridicule vows as meaningless tokens, with the intent to make the flock their own. They stand on the Creeds, they say, and only want to insure that you are orthodox. That you are holy. That you are right with God. And that you are following them. They hop over the wall, lay themselves right down at the opening of the sheepfold and tell you that if you want in, you must do it their way.

But Jesus, speaking your name softly, as a beloved shepherd, wants you to know that your salvation comes not from being pure, but from a relationship with him. He's the one who is pure—pure enough for all of us. We get to enter into the sheepfold, no matter that

we're lepers or blind or Gentiles. We are invited to his table, even if we're female. Even if we're sinful. Even if we're so sinful that nobody else in the world wants us in the flock. He wants us. And he calls our name.

At the very beginning of the Jesus movement, the Church lived this way. Luke tells us that they "had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Of course it didn't last. Because the thieves just couldn't stand it. So they invented whole new ways of being pure, whole new religious traditions that soon proved just as stifling to gaining real life as the old ways did. And the thievery hasn't stopped.

But before the plunder began, those early Jesus people lived that promised real, abundant life. They understood that salvation is not some pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die-by-and-by, but is right now, lived in a community of faith, with people who share their most intimate moments with each other. Where people know each other's name. Where people know their shepherd's voice.

That's the life that Jesus calls us to right now. But there's one more thing, because you knew I couldn't let you leave without a Deacon's word. Notice that Jesus says the sheep "come in and go out and find pasture." The sheepfold, as comforting as it is, with our little black noses nuzzled sweetly into Jesus' arms, still isn't the pasture. The pasture is outside the sheepfold. Where there lots of other sheep, stumbling around, food for the wolves and bounty for the thieves. They need to hear Jesus' voice, too. They need the sheepfold to come into, along with us. They need the real, abundant life that we've got here. And it's our job to help bring them into it.

I guess this was a Deacon's sermon after all.

Amen.