

Good Shepherd Sunday/Easter IV (April 25, 2021)Text: John 10:11-18  
***“Shep-herd Me?”***

The appointed Gospel reading this morning is only a small segment of what is known as the Good Shepherd Discourse — eight verses, about half of the total discourse. Listen to what Jesus says just before today’s reading:

***“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”*** Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, ***“Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”***

It would be tempting — and not altogether inappropriate — to use these words with today’s reading to extol the virtue of the relationship between the Good Shepherd and each and every one of God’s “little lambs;” to encourage them to know and listen to the voice of the Shepherd; to know more than just His voice — to know Him and follow Him; to take this life He offered and live it to the full; to remember, always with gratitude, that this Good Shepherd is not only willing to lay down His life for us, but did just that so that we could be brought into this loving covenant with their Father God.

That is a message that we draw from Jesus’ discourse.

There is, however, a slight problem with that exegesis — it assumes singularity. One of the emphases of the imagery of the sheep and shepherd is on the personal relationship between the two. The sheep, Jesus tells us, “*know,*” “*hear,*” and “*follow*” the shepherd. The shepherd, in turn, “*calls,*” “*leads,*” “*knows,*” “*lays down his life for*” and “*gives life to*” the sheep. It is our very strong tendency to hear all of that as applying to “me.”

*“I am Jesus’ little lamb / Ever glad at heart I am. / For my shepherd gently guides me / Knows my need and well supplies me / Loves me every day the same / Even calls me by my name.”*

We’ve been taught that song since we were two — so some of us have been singing it for four, five, six decades and longer. Even if you’ve had that message in your ears for only a decade or so, it becomes one of the primary faith-messages we embrace. Faith is about me and Jesus, me and God, what Jesus does for me, what I do in response. It is my religion, my faith, my attitude, my beliefs.

Our problem . . . [oops! assumption there! There’s a problem? — Yes, there is!] . . . our problem is with the word “sheep.” In English, the word “sheep” can be both singular and plural. “*Bah, bah, black sheep, have you any wool?*” One animal is being addressed. How do we know? We don’t; we assume it. Because, in English, we are inclined to assume the singular unless we have context to understand the plural is being used. “Sheep” and “you” are both; but we are inclined to move toward the singular use. Most other languages, it should be noted, are more precise with their cases, declensions, and numbers; this is especially true of the Greek of the New Testament.

“You” singular in Greek is ὑμων (humon); “You” plural is ὑμεις (humeis). “Sheep” singular is πρόβατον (probaton); “sheep” plural is πρόβατα (probata) — you know immediately whether the subject is one sheep or a whole bunch of sheep (well, at least two). In the Good Shepherd discourse throughout, Jesus uses the plural πρόβατα (probata).

Now, I expect that some of you (plural) are saying to yourselves, “*So what?*” Here’s the “*So what.*” Jesus is called the Good Shep-herd — He is not called the “shep-tender” or the “shep-keeper” nor the ‘shep-guide” The “herd” in Shep-herd” indicates that Jesus has in mind always this flock (or as he also refers to it in the translation in today’s bulletin, this “fold”) — more grammar lesson: that’s what is called a “collective noun,” a singular word in number but meaning a group or collection of items, in this case, ovine creatures. If Jesus gives such concern about the flock, so should we.

The flock (we sometimes refer to it as the congregation) is the primary unit for the church. The individual, while important, is not the primary focus. It is our self-centeredness, our sin, that pushes us to think solely along the lines of “me.” The New Testament model, the flock model, is more concerned with “us” and “we” than with “me,” “myself,” and “I.” What I think, what I say, what I do has relevance — but within the church that relevance is relevant essentially only when it has impact on the flock

Let me get right at the issue: About this time of the year we ask young people to make very personal statements about what each of them believes and how they intend those beliefs (we call this Affirmation of Baptism or Confirmation; we don’t have the happening this year because of the slight interruption we’ve all experienced). Such beliefs are personal, inherently singular; but the faith to which such beliefs bind us is inherently corporate, plural. I cannot believe for Confirmands, or anyone else for that matter — such beliefs are possible only for the individual. But when individuals embrace these beliefs, they are part of that great collective, the Church. They are still individuals, but they are something altogether other than just individuals

You and I are bound together into this mystery known as the Church. That word, “church” is drawn from the Greek word, κυριος (kurios), the word means “belonging to the Lord” Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “***I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also,***

*and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*” Please make note of the fact that Jesus doesn’t say “*There are other sheep . . .*” He lays claim on them: “*I have . . .*” In like manner He has laid claim on each of us. We no longer can consider ourselves just as individuals who happen to fall into a category. We are the fold, the herd for whom the Good Shepherd is the Good Shepherd. We need to live as if that were true.

*Pastor, are you suggesting that we do not so live?* Yes, I am doing more than suggest it; I am affirming it. Far too often, individuals cannot get past their individualism and immerse themselves into the flock.

A decision is made; I voted against it — I have then every right to absent myself from the group that made that decision over my objections. Yes, you do, “individual.” But as the flock, you do not. The flock cannot survive individuals; the flock must be a cohesive whole.

Does this mean that there is no room for dissent? Are we to adopt a true herd mentality and just “go with the flow”? No, it does not mean that. It does mean that we need to find ways to disagree (when we do, in fact disagree over something) and still be together.

You wanted green carpeting; somebody else wanted blue. Blue had the majority support. Does that mean that those who voted for green like you and those who voted for blue dislike you? You might say that no one would get that upset over a matter so inconsequential. It has been my experience that the more inconsequential the issue the more vested in it people become, and the more it will drive a wedge into the flock

It is not just that we seek harmony, or that the “losing” side in any decision should just sit down and shut up. No, the issue is not harmony, it is safety. Satan delights to find Christians who are not in the fold — they’re easy pickin’s for “*the wolf* [who] *snatches them and scatters them.*” Oh, we can individually convince ourselves that our self is sufficiently enured against the Devil’s blandishments — but Jesus knows better. This is why He lays down His life for us — so that our lives may

be kept within the fold.

So my prayer this day is that we seek truly to be shep-*herded*; guided by the Good Shepherd into the fold that He leads, the sheep (plural) go in and out in safety. Individually, God has blessed each of you with gifts and talents, some of which you have only begun to realize. Individually, you today, and for many days thereafter, will express the beliefs you hold. But it is collectively, as the Body of Christ, the Church, that you listen to and follow the voice of the Good Shepherd.

The power that emboldened and enabled the early disciples (as we see in today's First Lesson) to do signs and wonders, is the gift to the Church. The love that God has poured into our hearts can be expressed only in community, as we care for each other and reach out to the broader community and indeed the whole world.

It is my prayer that your daily prayer will become, "*Shep-herd Us, O Lord.*"

Amen.