



## *“Flock Life”*

John 10:11-18

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**May 3, 2009**

Fourth Sunday of Easter

When I was in my early 20s, my grandparents and my great uncle were killed in a terrible automobile accident. Retired farmers, they were out for a drive in the country when a drunk driver hit them. My great aunt Alta was the lone survivor.

My parents, my brother, and I were left with the sad task of cleaning out my grandparents house, taking care of their estate, planning a funeral, and driving four hours to Oregon to Uncle Clair’s funeral – all in six days.

It was my first experience of death and tragedy. My grandparents played an important part in my childhood. I spent part of every summer on my grandparents’ farm. Grandpa taught me how to drive a tractor, milk a cow, buck a bale, and stack hay. Grandma always let me feed the chickens, and she entertained me at night after Grandpa fell asleep on the couch. We made an annual trip to Uncle Clair’s dairy in Oregon where I played in the barn with my cousin, hunted birds in the woods, and watched Uncle Clair bottle milk for his customers.

The enormity of the tragedy hit me at the funeral. Those two caskets at the front of the church were nearly more than I could bear. Overwhelmed by grief, I could scarcely hold back the sobs that came from a place deeper inside me than I knew existed. My brother and I wept together for the first time.

The minister, a young man himself in his first church, seemed stunned by what was a small town tragedy. During the service, he read the twenty-third Psalm. Those familiar words reached out of long history and eternity and, somehow, mysteriously, mixed calm and peace into the raw grief that ravaged my soul. You know the words, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures; he restoreth my soul. He leadeth me beside the still waters....Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,... thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life....

After 3,000 years of constant use, those ancient words still seem to work. Nearly every funeral service features the old Psalm. Those words are read at the bedside of the dying. Psalm 23 appears in the lectionary readings for the church several times each year. Today, Good Shepherd Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Easter, is one of them.

In a way it’s strange that Psalm 23 still bears such power. After all, most of us have little or no experience with shepherding or with sheep. The image of the Good Shepherd is shaped by religious art, tradition, repetition and old biblical stories. I’m not sure where it came from, Sunday School book or some stained glass window, but I have a vivid image of Jesus standing holding a lamb in his left arm and a staff in his right hand.

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It's not a bad image, but it needs some enhancement. There is more than meets the eye when Jesus declares, "I am the Good Shepherd...." Two stories from the gospels add content to our incomplete images. They help us to hear and to see our Good Shepherd.

The first story is one Jesus told to his disciples. It's a story about God, the God Jesus came to reveal, and it's also a story about the character of the community Jesus came to form.

A shepherd had 100 sheep. One of them went missing. The shepherd left the other ninety-nine sheep in the fold and went looking for the missing sheep. He searched high and low through the night into the morning. Restlessly and relentlessly he looked for that lost sheep. Through danger, over streams, up steep slopes, and in crags and valleys, he looked for that sheep so dear to his heart.

At long last, he found the lost sheep hurt and lying in a ditch. With joy he lifted the sheep and put it across his shoulders – it was an adult sheep mind you - and headed home. When he arrived he invited all his friends and neighbors over for a party to celebrate finding that sheep. God is like that shepherd, Jesus taught. And the community of the faithful, a bunch of sheep ourselves, are like that the guests at the party who rejoice with love and affection for every lost sheep that is found. We are a place of joy and open hospitality extended to all.

Now hear Jesus one more time, "I am the Good Shepherd. I give my life for my sheep."

In the second story, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem where the powers-that-be were determined to be rid of him. On the way to his destiny, Jesus taught his disciples about God and the reign of God among them. In words we use each communion service, he said that when God is in charge, people will "come from the east and the west, the north and the south and sit at God's banquet table together."

Someone told him that King Herod, a power hungry despot fearful of Jesus' popularity, wanted to kill him. Jesus sent a cryptic message back to Herod, and then said of Jerusalem where he would meet death, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not listen."

Can you hear him better now, "I am the Good Shepherd? I give my life for my sheep." I know my sheep by name and they know me. Like a hen with her chicks, like a shepherd who will not give up until every lost sheep is found, I am your Good Shepherd and you are my dearly loved flock.

There are at least two lessons for Anniversary Sunday in the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd - a Good Shepherd who speaks for and serves God whom Scripture calls the Great Shepherd of the sheep. One lesson is about the shepherd. The second is about being his sheep.

We have a Good Shepherd who calls, cares, protects, feeds and leads us. That means, of course, the Christian church; we sheep belong to Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. That Good Shepherd calls us to be his flock. He tends his flock and leads us into green pastures. He restores our souls. He is with us in the valley of the shadow of death. He extends his arms and invites everyone, everywhere, "Come to me...I will give you rest." To put it another way: the church has a center, and that center makes the church what it is: the church.

This church was gathered 162 years ago this week by the Good Shepherd. From the beginning, Plymouth was founded upon and centered in Jesus Christ. Because Plymouth was a progressive church and challenged old Puritan orthodoxy, it was accused of turning from its founder.

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Fifty years after its founding, on Anniversary Sunday, May 16, 1897, Lyman Abbot, Henry Ward Beecher's distinguished successor, tackled that accusation head on. In his sermon, Abbot said,

The heart of Mr. Beecher's teaching was this: that Jesus Christ was God manifest in the flesh. The center that holds this church together is its faith in Jesus Christ and its loyalty to him....We do not ask what men believe on other things...the one thing we demand is loyalty to Jesus Christ....The one things that holds us together is this: we all love Christ as our Savior; we all acknowledge him as our Master; we all follow him as our Leader; we all bow down to him with absolute allegiance as our Lord.

While obvious, the centrality of Christ is easily lost in the life of a church. It happens somewhat regularly in every kind of church. It happened at Plymouth. In 1941, Wendell Fifield became the fifth Minister of the congregation. He succeeded a long time minister who'd been very ill for several years. The church apparently became complacent over the years and, as a popular destination in the neighborhood, succumbed to voices other than Christ's. In his first sermon at Plymouth, Fifield called the congregation back to its first love. He said this:

The central task of the church is to make Christ's message of eternal life real to the people....Sometimes commercialism, ritualism, [and] superficiality have crept in. Then the church has lost its power. And then a time has come when the church regained her primary purpose and ceased to be primarily a club, entertainment center, political agency, propaganda power, or social circle.

The church has become once more the agency of the spirit of Christ in the desperately difficult business of saving the world.

This is much more than a mere theological point. The centrality of Christ bears profound ethical and practical implications. When the church heeds other voices whether political, economic, or even religious, the church loses its soul – and its reason for being. If Jesus Christ is no longer the Lord of the church, a congregation should make him central again – or close its doors.

The second lesson for Anniversary Sunday is equally obvious. We are Christ's flock of sheep.

Notice that the word sheep is both singular and plural. In fact, the word works best when used in the plural. To speak of "a sheep" is a bit clumsy. Sheep live in flocks. By nature, sheep are communal animals. You don't hear of a lone, rugged, individual sheep out on its own making its way in the world.

Christians are meant to live in flocks. Christian spirituality is not some vague internal and individual system of spirituality that nurtures lone individuals. Christian faith is communal or it is less than Christianity. Our faith is lived out in communities that shape us, nurture us, care for us, and discipline us.

Now, it must be added, that sheep pens get messy. It's in the nature of sheep. Living together is always challenging. Plymouth, like every church on earth, is a unique cast of characters. We're an educated and successful cast of characters, and agreeing on matters large or small is not easy. Besides, we're New Yorkers so all of us know we are right and everyone else is wrong!

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Yet, Jesus goes on to add that there is “one shepherd, one flock.” It is in the nature of Christian churches to figure out how to live with diverse personalities and opinions for the sake of the kingdom of God.

I’ve told this story before but it bears repeating – and I told it four years ago, so most of you have forgotten it or didn’t hear it!

Bob and Norma both came to Christian faith as adults. They were both high school dropouts, but their lives diverged dramatically. Bob was a self-made man who became the richest man in town. He retired by age 50; then tired of retirement, he re-invented himself. He was married to a classy, stylish woman who wore a gorgeous fur coat to church in the winter. It’s the only fur coat I saw in that town.

Norma’s life was quite different. She was a bar maid in town married to a man who was seldom employed. Norma barely eked out a living for her family. At one time in her life she’d turned to prostitution to put food on the table.

One Sunday morning, the church was full to capacity. Bob and his wife were seated on the aisle toward the front of the church. Norma came in late and as she came down the aisle, Bob and his wife scooted over to make room for Norma on the aisle. What a sight! On one side of Bob was his well dressed and fine looking wife. On the other, Norma, plainly dressed with lines of her hard life etched on her face.

When it came time for the next hymn, we stood to sing. Bob reached for the hymn book and I could see the wheels turning in his head. He hesitated, then opened the book, and shared it with Norma, and they began to sing the praises of God together.

What a sight! I must admit, I teared up and said to myself, “This social phenomenon could happen only in a church centered in the Good Shepherd – who calls all to come to his table to eat together and side by side.

Here we are on this significant Sunday at table with the Good Shepherd. Plymouth Church has a wonderful heritage. We are living in a vibrant present. We have reason to hope for an even better future. And, as always, the Good Shepherd invites us to table, “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened down, and I will give you rest.”

Amen.

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