

### **Growing Shepherds**

Acts 2: 42 – 47; 1 Peter 2: 19 – 25; John 10: 1-10

I don't know about you, but I just LOVE the New Testament images of shepherds, don't you – gathering in awe at Jesus' birth; going to amazing lengths to save the one little lamb who falls into ditch; and now, standing at the gate to eternal life, and welcoming us in.

And when times get tough in my own life, I find this image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, incredibly reassuring. There's such an intimacy, a tenderness, a sense of being known and loved for exactly who I am, that fills me with peace. Kind of like that Bob Marley song – hit it Jeff – “People don't worry... 'bout a thing... cause every little thing... is gonna' be all right.” C'mon, sing along...

But there's a problem. Remember Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's sermon at our Diocesan Convention that we watched together in the parish hall last November? “*The thing about Jesus,*” Bishop Curry said, “*is that he had a habit of turning the world upside down, which for us Christians is actually right side up.*” And this is exactly what Jesus does in today's gospel parable about the Good Shepherd.

First of all, it may come as a surprise to you that people listening to Jesus, and all his talk about sheep and shepherds, most likely responded by saying. “What?” “Shepherds?” “Yucch!!”

You see, in Jesus' time, shepherds were despised. They smelled awful from bedding down outside with their flock for weeks at a time; they were nomads, wandering from place to place; and people believed they would steal whatever they could from honest folks, as they grazed their sheep far and wide.

And if people looked down on shepherds, they didn't think highly of their sheep either. Priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor describes sheep this way. “*Everyone,*” she says, “*...knows that sheep are, well, sheep. They panic easily, and refuse to be pushed. They make most of their decisions based on their appetites... and they tend to get into head butting contests for no reason at all.*”<sup>1</sup> Actually, that description reminds me of some of us humans.

Once again, Jesus picks the most unlikely of characters to raise up as central figures in his plan for salvation. Once again, he's expressing his preference to spend time with tax collectors, prostitutes and now shepherds, the people Jesus calls “the last, the least, and the lost.”

For us, this contains some good news and some bad news. The bad news about Jesus elevating shepherds to some kind of equal status with the rest of us, is that he actually expects us to hang around people like that. And the good news? Well, apparently he's saying that there's a lot more room in Jesus' kingdom than we thought, for people like you and me.

Rather than carefully bred pedigreed sheep, Jesus has been given the most ordinary of flocks. But because he loves us, Jesus explains that he's the gatekeeper, the one through whom we enter the fold, the place where we can be with the rest of God's people in safety, where we

know we will be fed, and nurtured and inspired. And then, when it's time to venture out into the rough and tumble world, we know that we have a good shepherd to lead us, one whose voice we know, one we can rely on to keep us on the right track, to pick us up when we fall down, and when we get lost, to keep searching until he can find us, and carry us home.

By becoming a human role model, Jesus has become the access point to God, the very source of life. He's constantly on watch, assuring our well – being. *“Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will go in and come out and find pasture... I come that you might have life, and have it abundantly.”*

And that's the wonderful challenge Jesus lays down in today's gospel. We all know what it's like to be sheep. In fact, I have to confess that I sometimes envy the animals we're charged to take care of. Brendan, for example, spends no time ruminating over past mistakes, or worrying whether there'll be enough to eat or a soft bed to sleep on tomorrow night. He lives in the present, hyper aware of his environment, and ready to spring into action at every moment, defend his territory from geese that land in the yard, or even from a sketchy looking plastic bag that blows down the street.

So part of me thinks it would be cool to be a sheep, to be told what to do, to know where I can find good grazing, and a safe place to sleep. *“Every little thing is gonna' be all right”* as Bob Marley says.

But the question Jesus asks is whether we're also willing to become shepherds. Are we willing to enter into a new covenant, one of *shared* responsibility for our flock, our community? Are we willing to become a source of security, of unconditional love, a source of life for each other? *“Do we dare to accept that responsibility,”* Jesus asks. *“Or are we content with the role of ‘hired hands,’ who run away when the sheep are attacked by wolves?”*

What does it mean to be both sheep and shepherd? As a sheep, it means committing to follow the Good Shepherd, the source of life and life abundant, the one who wishes us the deepest significance and joy in our lives. It means staying radically open to God, listening and learning, just as Jesus did every day of his life.

And to become a shepherd? It means practicing a radical openness to God's people, listening to the stirrings of our own hearts and theirs, and trying our best to respond, just as Jesus did. It means listening to our own passions and the great needs of God's people, and staying in the space where those two intersect. It means helping to build a community of love and peace, of reconciliation and justice, here at Trinity, and out there in the larger communities we serve, so that all of God's sheep might be cared for as the beloved creatures they are.

And why bother? Because in the end, we are all lost sheep. And if we choose, we can also be shepherds, helping each other find our way home to the source of all hope and love in our lives, Jesus, our own Good Shepherd.

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<sup>i</sup> Taylor, B. B. (1993). *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, p. 145.