

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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April 17, 2016

In the reading from the Gospel of John we hear about flocks of sheep, and namely about the flock of sheep who can call Jesus their shepherd. I always get a chuckle out of farming or agriculture metaphors, of which there are countless in the Bible and in the teachings of Jesus. After all look around. We are about as far away from a shepherd and sheep as we can get. Not only is there city all around us but to the east of us there is a huge body of water. No sheep there, and to the west of us, the place where I drove from this morning, the western suburbs green lawns, trust me, no sheep their either.

And with our disconnection from things like herding sheep or growing fig trees or separating wheat from chaff, we are often left scratching out heads trying to figure out what these metaphors mean for our modern lives. So my brothers and sisters in Christ, let's talk about sheep.

One of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, starts off a sermon of hers in this way, "One of our favorite names for Jesus is the Good Shepherd—

the Lord who lays down his life for the sheep, who knows his sheep by name and who leads them beside the still waters. All of this makes for good sermons, except that somehow or another the preacher must deal with the congregation's likeness to sheep, which does not always sit well, since most of us think of sheep as slobbering, untidy, *dumb* animals who exist only to be shaved or slaughtered."

Then why sheep, and why would we want to be one?

Ok let's get into some serious sheep talk. It turns out that sheep are pretty amazing animals. Picture a Bedouin shepherd, pacing the hills of sun kissed Palestine; as he walks over the craggy rocks with a herd of 50 sheep follows right behind him. There is no pushing or prodding, no fences to keep them going in the right direction like other barnyard animals have to have. Rather, the sheep merely follow the shepherd. All that the sheep need to know is that their shepherd goes ahead of them, showing them that everything that lies in front of them is safe.

The bond between shepherd and sheep is one of trust and communication. The sheep follow the shepherd because of all things they know the shepherds

voice. They have heard him call time and time again, strengthening the relationship and creating an inseparable connection.

Now picture that Bedouin shepherd in the desert leading his sheep to the only watering hole for miles around. When the herd arrives they are not the only ones. Other shepherds with other flocks, with equally strong bonds of trust and communication are also there, lapping up the cool life giving water. The sheep plod down to the edge of the water and before long in their desperate desire to quench their thirst have all formed a large mass horde of sheep, indistinguishable from one another, losing all sense of group or who belongs to whom. So what happens next? When the sheep have had their fill, and the shepherd is ready to move on, he calls to the sheep. He calls out, or whistles, or plays a tune on a pipe or flute. And like magic, the sheep hear their shepherd's voice, and the sheep rejoin their shepherd and continue once more to follow without the slightest need to take a head count.

This story of sheep and shepherds is predicated, formed, built on this profound connection. But let's not kid ourselves. It's easy to be a sheep. Sheep can have this all consuming connection and singularity of purpose because when's the last time those sheep have had bills to pay, or student

loans to pay off, or a car to fix, or a rent to pay, or friends to have over, or boss to answer to. One of my favorite sayings is that all metaphors, no matter how good they are, break down at some point. And is this where our metaphor seems to break down? Is life too complicated these days to be followers of Jesus? As cell phones go off, as music pumps from our headphones, and as Netflix releases its newest bingeable TV show, are our lives too filled with other things that call to us and beckon to be followed? Is Jesus going to get frustrated with our lack of singular devotion and stop calling and leave us at the watering hole?

Well let's take a look back at our Gospel passage from John. The conflict in this passage is that Jesus has been preaching and performing miracles all over Judea but there are still those who don't recognize that he is the Messiah. They have been around to hear Jesus and he has told them rather plainly in the chapters leading up to today's reading that I am "the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life;" that if you know me you know my Father in heaven;" that he is the Son of Man. Jesus has told them, and they have heard him, physically heard him with their ears, but that is different than understanding what those words mean. They have heard Jesus' words and seen his actions but they are unwilling to see and

hear Jesus for who he really is. They do not comprehend the call; they do not realize the connection, they are too distracted by their own agendas to really follow Jesus. And for this we hear they are not a part of Jesus' flock.

Those are some dangerous words aren't they? This passage seems to suggest that there are those who belong and those who don't. Jesus says, "you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." This is what we are ultimately afraid of right? We are afraid that we do not belong perhaps because we think that we don't believe enough or swear too much or ignore that one homeless guy on the street one too many times and therefore we don't deserve to be members of Jesus' sheep. We're afraid that we'll go down to the watering hole on Sunday morning and we won't hear Jesus call or Jesus won't call to us at all and so instead of walking off with Jesus we walk off with another group of mangy untended for sheep, whose wool isn't cared for because they aren't going back to the hills to graze but instead are going with all of the other undesirable sheep to the slaughter house. This is an awful picture isn't it? And this sort of theology, the theology of scarcity is often shoved down our throats; that there are insiders and outsiders; that there are those whom Jesus loves and calls his sheep and there are others who

are not because they don't love the right people, because they don't live correctly, because they don't have enough faith.

You've seen the signs driving along the road: "Heaven or Hell You Decide?" or "You *will* meet God?" With the implication that *you* really don't want to meet God. My friends this theology is not Gospel and it is not what our text says today. Our word Gospel comes from the Greek for Good News and the Good News this morning is that the voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, "do this or believe that, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep." It says, "you belong to me already." It says "I call to you because you are mine, my beloved, and I care for you."

We are now all experts on shepherding, we can resolve the remaining perceived tension in the text. How do we know that a sheep belongs to a shepherd? In other words, how do we know that we belong to Jesus? What about the naughty sheep or the unruly sheep are they no longer the shepherd's? What about the one's that get skittish and lose faith in the shepherd when the wolf comes? Are they no longer in the shepherds care? Have we wondered off one too many times?

No. The sheep belong to the shepherd because the shepherd calls to them and they recognize his voice. The sheep belong because the shepherd first claims them and then the rest of their lives the sheep will listen for the shepherd's call. When the sheep wanders off, when you or I go astray, when we refuse to listen as those in our text today do, as we will each and everyday as we are both sinners and saints, the faithful and the full of doubt, Jesus tells us in another parable that when this happens that he will leave the rest of the flock to bring you back and how much more he will rejoice because you were lost and now are found. That, my friends is Gospel, that is called forgiveness, that is called the love of God that always calls to us.

There is an old saying by Martin Luther that says: "The baby chicks are saved from the eagle's talons not because of their own faith that the mother hen will protect them, rather, the mother hen protects the chicks with her wings and because she keeps them safe they have faith." Well what if we substituted sheep for birds and the mother hen with the Good Shepherd.

Then we the sheep are saved from wondering off and from the teeth of the wolf not because we have faith that the shepherd will save us, rather, the shepherd calls out to the sheep, feeds them, keeps them close and fends off the

wolves at night and because the shepherd does all of this we follow and have faith. The call comes first, faith comes second.

Amidst the noise of our daily life take time to listen for Jesus calling you. It's there. It is always there, from your Baptism, in the words of scripture, in acts of charity, in the face of the stranger on the street, in the eyes of a baby, in your prayers before God, in the company of loved ones. Look for the breaking of God's call in your life claiming you as his own, and in the words of the 23rd Psalm, protecting you with the shepherd's rod and staff, leading you beside still water, so that you may lie down in green pastures and have your soul restored. Amen.