

“Part of the Flock” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church 5/3/09

TEXT: John 10:11-18 ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’

It is decidedly inconvenient. that images of sheep and shepherd are so prevalent in our Scriptures. Abraham, the father of our faith, was the keeper of great flocks. Moses was tending sheep for his father-in-law, Jethro, when God called him into service. David was a shepherd boy called in from the fields to be the King of Israel. Ezekiel identified God’s action toward broken and scattered people as the work of a shepherd with the words, “I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed.” When Isaiah spoke of the coming of the Messiah he worded it: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd! He will gather his lambs into his arms." Our beloved 23rd Psalm is the *shepherd* psalm.

And then there is Jesus, who once told a story about a shepherd who had 100 sheep, but left the 99 to go in search of one who had gone astray; who, when speaking to a great throng of people, had compassion upon them because they were "as sheep without a shepherd."; who, in this morning’s reading, declared himself the Good Shepherd.

Shepherd imagery is decidedly inconvenient. We not easily relate in this culture; we tend to romanticize shepherds, holding up wood carvings with a boy holding a lamb, imagining our children with shepherd crooks in the Christmas pageant. Even worse, not only do we not relate to shepherds,, the insistent and unavoidable implication is that we, the people of God, are actually the sheep of God. Decidedly inconvenient – actually, downright uncomfortable.

Sheep are ungainly and gnarly creatures, not always clean, not always quiet. Nor are sheep very bright. Sheep get lost by nibbling away at the grass and never looking up. A domestic flock would literally die of thirst if you moved their water supply a hundred yards in any direction, Sheep can’t distinguish the healthy from the unhealthy. In sheep country in Texas, there is a plant called bitterweed. Sheep love it, but it is highly poisonous. Nonetheless, if a sheep pen is near a patch of bitterweed, the sheep will literally rip their own wool off to get to it, and then they will eat and eat until they are done for.

Sheep have limited resources. They rely on the shepherd when they are lost, scattered, or afraid, They trust that there will always be a Good Shepherd there to guide them, to protect them, to bring them back to the safety of the fold. They desperately need a

trustworthy leader, who will lay down his life for them, knows them by name, who will never abandon them. There is an old Palestinian adage which says, “never count your sheep.” It means, don’t reduce sheep to numbers. They are so important in that culture and to the well being of the family that each sheep gets a name, never a number. Likewise for the Good Shepherd, the relationship between sheep and shepherd, is not just close, but intimate.

In describing himself as an owner, not a hireling or a thief, Jesus is not engaging in politics or polemics but is proclaiming the truth at the heart of the gospel. Christ’s very being enacts God’s relationship with the beloved creation, and is instigated not by us but by God. The sheep do not earn the Shepherd or elect him. Nothing that we are or do can abrogate the relationship. We cannot stray or fall or fail in such a way as to be lost to God – ever—because we belong to God. “Body and soul, in life and in death,” as the Heidelberg Catechism would remind us.

But the other thing sheep desperately need is each other. “Now, Johnny,” said the teacher, “if there were 11 sheep in a field and six jumped the fence, how many would there be left?” “None,” replied Johnny. “Why, yes there would,” said the teacher. “No, ma’am, there wouldn’t,” persisted Johnny. “You may know arithmetic, but you don’t know sheep.”

The flock, their "community," is their identity. They know how to do the flock thing and make it work.

In the English language there is no separate singular form of the word sheep. Karl Barth said that there is no such thing as an individual Christian. In our essential blongingness, our being is bound up with the entire flock: As sheep of the Good Shepherd, we belong to each other as well.

There is truth in the Celtic blessing, "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live" – for then we see the world with a larger level than self. It is when we become concerned with others that we find the depth of God's love for our lives. “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I also” said Jesus..

In these perilous times, when the rules are changing and the social safety nets are unraveling so quickly, when personal or family security seems several deep notches more uncertain; it's of great value to know what is ultimately trustworthy, for ourselves, and for everyone we feel responsible for. When we feel safe, connected, belonging, seen, understood, loved, and accepted for who we are; we tend to be open, trusting, engaged, flexible, resilient in our relationships and in our dealings with our selves and our world.

The power of people coming together to renew their faith in what we hold to be ultimate wisdom, ultimate refuge, is not only honoring our Shepherd, it is honoring the light within each other. In the presence of Christ, we are re-fueled and re-sourced. We can better face any disappointment, any darkness, any devastation.

By remembering who we truly are and who we are willing to be for each other, we can be nourished and sustained by a communion deeper than our ordinary days. As part of the flock, we know that somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength that joins strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

That is the kind of flock that the church is called to be. Christ's body on earth is also Christ's flock on earth. Such community is not without work, not without some sacrifice, some concessions of independence. Within the flock we look out for one another and we join in the workaday drudgery. If your expectation of church is the thrill of one euphoric experience after another, you'll probably never return. If on the other hand you view the church of the Good Shepherd as a verdant garden full of sweet corn and manure, both holiness and holy mess, you will feast forever. Church is about more than satisfying personal desires and hanging around like minded people. At least it ought to be. It is a community where we have a realistic shot at being touched, being changed, being enlarged, finding purpose --once we've immersed our lives in the joys and sorrows of everyone else's life. Church offers an unsurpassed opportunity to stop life, at least once a week, and give collective thanks for blessings too many to number.

Some of the beauty and significance of church is total mystery. Why people would bother to love others, forgive others, and serve others in the peculiarly Christ-like ways we do is beyond comprehension. Metaphorically speaking, it's like a jumble of words coming together to form an unexplainably rich poem.

This metaphor is not entirely fanciful. It comes from of all places a sheep farm in northeastern England. A writer there, Valerie Laws, received a public arts council grant to create a living poem with living sheep. She spray painted a single word onto the back of every sheep. From a raised platform, she watches as the sheep wander about, and she records a kind of organic haiku, a new or poetic form that emerges every time the sheep came to rest.

This is a pretty good image for the church. "We are the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand," says the psalmist in Psalm 95. We would do well to think of God writing poetry with our lives. You can't write a poem with one word. It takes the whole flock. Half the time we are a jumbled mess. Sometimes we fight over our place. Other times an inept hired hand allows the slightest sign of trouble to scatter the flock. But always, the Good Shepherd is trying to figure out how to get us to be this unexplainably rich poem we are capable of being.

The poet Hafiz wrote:

Out of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is far too dangerous
For that.

We are the sheep of God's fold, the lambs of Christ's flock.

"In every community there is work to be done. In every nation, there are wounds to heal. In every heart there is the power to do it." (Marianne Williamson)

May it be so.