

“GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY”

John 10:7-18, Easter 4-B,

April 22, 2018

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

When the Risen Christ was walking along to road to Emmaus with Cleopas and that other disciple that first Easter afternoon (Luke 24:13-35), he told them that “all of the law, the prophets and the psalms find their fulfillment in me!”

And certainly these beautiful words of Psalm 23 find their fulfillment in him also! And yet these words of our Gospel greatly challenge us too, because here, Jesus not only tell us that he is our Good Shepherd, he is also the door to the sheep pen, and the doorkeeper at the sheep pen too!

But whether or not we tend to focus more on Jesus being the Good Shepherd, or the Door to the sheep pen, or the Doorkeeper of the sheep pen--I have recently become struck how simple and straightforward one piece of this analogy remains! No matter what else we do with Jesus’ multi-tasking functions here; whom we see first as our shepherd, secondly as the door to the sheep pen and thirdly as the doorkeeper of the sheep pen, our role always remains the same: We are the sheep!

Jesus is the shepherd, but we are the sheep

Jesus is the door to the sheep pen, but we are the sheep!

Jesus is the doorkeeper of the sheep pen, but we are still the sheep!

Remembering that we are the door to the sheep pen or the doorkeeper of the sheep pen--impresses upon us the fact that it is simply not us who is to decide who is allowed and who is to be barred from the sheep pen.

“I have other sheep,” he says in verse 16, “that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd!”

It’s hard for us to be 100% absolutely certain who these other sheep are, but most theologians believe that Jesus is talking about all the Gentiles, remembering that the Jewish people are the only people who have one word to describe everyone else who is not Jewish; closely related to the word “heathen” and the word “pagan.”

While there are indeed countless references in the Old Testament assuring us of the special place that the people of Israel have long had as God’s especially, adopted people in this world, there are also those Biblical references in

the Old Testament that reveal to us that it has always been God's intention to bring others into his sheepfold too.

This is the whole purpose behind the book of Jonah. God did have compassion in his heart and mind towards the lost people of Nineveh though Jonah did not!

The books of Ruth, and Ester, and Amos all remind us that God has a missionary zeal in his heart towards other the other peoples of this world too! Esther reminds us that God loves the other peoples of this world too!

The primary purpose of the sheep pen was and is to protect the sheep from thieves and predators and to protect us who are the sheep from our own foolishness and the natural inclination we all have at times, to strike out on our own, to become our own shepherd ourselves. And the Prophet Isaiah said this, 700 years before our Savior was born in Isaiah 53: ***"All we like sheep have gone astray! We have all turned to our own way and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all!"***

If we are not the door to the sheep pen and if we are not the doorkeeper of the sheep pen then **neither are we the shepherd!** Instead, we are the sheep who are to be most grateful that we have One, however, who is our Good Shepherd--our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Friends, I want to remind you that in the 9th chapter of John's Gospel, immediately preceding our Gospel lesson today, that when Jesus and his disciples were entering the temple one morning--they encountered a poor man there, no doubt seeking a handout, who had been blind from birth.

Operating with some very faulty theology at work in their hearts and minds the disciples were prompted to asked Jesus, "Lord, who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him!" When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, **"Go wash in the pool of Siloam!"** which this blind man did! The he came back able to see.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he!" Others were saying: "No, but it is someone who looks like him!" But this former blind man, blind from birth, but who could now see--kept saying, "I am the man!"

When people ask him how it was possible that he now could see, when formerly he had been blind as a bat, he answered them: "The man Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and

wash!" Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know!"

You may remember that the Pharisees after conducting a thorough investigation with respect to this man, ended up excommunicating this dear man, who threw him out of the temple and refused to allow him entrance into the temple ever again.

It's in response to all of this lovelessness, that Jesus then calls this man to faith in himself and makes the further observation: "All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and 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!"

Then four times -- Jesus says it: "I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep!"

Jesus had some harsh words for those Pharisees because of the ill treatment that they gave to that dear man who had been born blind, but whose vision Jesus had not simply restored to him, but had now given to him initially, for the very first time...so that he could say: "I once was blind but now I see!"

Though this poor man had been thrown out of the temple and casted aside by the religious authorities, Jesus said that there was plenty of room for this man in the kingdom of God!

Those who think they belong to God, at times, might not really belong to him at all. But it's conversely true also--that those who do belong to God, may falsely believe that somehow they have been excluded; when nothing could be further from the truth!

Jesus said to these loveless, hard-hearted men: "You do not believe my words, because you do not belong to my sheep! My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand, and I and the Father are one!"

Sometimes we may question our faith! Sometimes we may question whether we really belong to Christ or not--because our faith is not always on fire for the Lord in a way that we know or believe that it should always be--- but let's not forget the fact that though we are the sheep of the Good Shepherd there are also times when we, also, unfortunately can too easily go! But the Lord still loves us and comes searching for us relentlessly until he finds us!

Sometimes we may call into question our own “status” as sheep of the Good Shepherd--because if we were truly his sheep--then we should never find ourselves at a loss for words, as to what we can tell others about him.

True sheep, we might think, are never embarrassed to be asked what they believe, or too shy, to answer that question for other people in a constantly articulate, eloquent and wise way! **Then there is the misnomer that true believers are always in constant touch with God, so that they understand what, where and why, everything that is happening to them, is happening to them on any given day, when St. Paul tells us: “For now we see through a glass darkly! One day we will see God face to face! Our understanding is so often only partial at best, but one day we will understand everything as completely as we are now understood by the Lord himself!**

Consequently, we may also falsely believe that true believers are never doubtful or afraid. They live in total confidence that they are in God’s hands and when they say their prayer at night, they are also certain that they can always hear God talking back to them!

Another popular belief is that believers invariably find worship a meaningful experience! They act on what they hear from the pulpit! They mean every word of the Nicene Creed always; every time they say it! And their hearts are always, and I mean, always strangely warmed every time they come forward to receive Holy Communion.

What bar, or bars, have you set so high for yourselves, at times, my brothers and sisters--as we occasionally take time to evaluate our own spiritual health--bar so high we can never reach them?

Is it that you do not pray enough, or witness enough, or read the Bible often enough? What golden ring is it that you place just high enough out of your reach--so that you can never quite reach it? Do every question whether or not you truly are one of Jesus sheep because when it comes to the Bible, you are just not knowledgeable enough, or enthusiastic enough, or sure enough about what it is that you do believe?

Whatever it is, please stop it! And my invitation to you today is to stop voting yourself off of Jesus’ island! Stop exiling yourself from the flock of Jesus’ sheep because of your beliefs about what it takes to belong and see if you cannot allow yourself to belong simply to belong to Christ because God he says that you do!

Let’s not forget--either--that Jesus himself reminds us--often--that true faith will sometimes show up far more often in our actions than it will in our words! For after all, we are not so much simply just members of an institution, called “The Church” as we are believers in a relationship--a relationship

with our God through faith in his Son Jesus Christ--that changes from day to day, week to week, month to month and year to year!

Remembering that we are sheep, and that we are sheep above all else, should also constantly remind us that truly believing in Jesus--does not mean--that we will never be afraid of what might happen to us; although it does mean, we know who we will turn to and who will be with us--when it does! Amen