

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A) – May 11, 2014
Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Today, on this fourth Sunday of Easter, we see again images of God as the proverbial good shepherd of the sheep, pastoral images that are pretty distant for us who live here in Brooklyn, and/or who drive on city streets or super highways to get here. But it *is* encouraging to be reminded of our place as creatures dependent on our God, interdependent with one another; and to be reminded of God as a truly kind, loving leader, enabling us to live a life that is real and abundant in the midst of all circumstances.

The first of two images we encounter in today's gospel is that of the true *shepherd* who knows the sheep, calls them by name, and leads them—a metaphor that was vividly familiar to Jesus and to those for whom John wrote his gospel. Most towns and villages in ancient Palestine had a common sheepfold which safely corralled the sheep each evening. These sheepfolds were open-air enclosures walled in by stones or twisted briars. To protect their flocks from four-legged, or two-legged, thieves and marauders, the shepherds took turns standing night-watch over the fold. Each morning, when the shepherds of the village would come to gather their flocks, the air would be filled with a subtle cacophony of voices as each called his sheep by whatever name or whistle or song they had mutually worked out over the years. And so, as the shepherd knows the sheep by name and disposition, so also Christ, the Good Shepherd, knows each of us by name, and knows that there is something unique and uniquely precious in each of us. In other words, God does not see human beings mainly as supporters or subscribers or supplicants, or as workers, or as clients, or as consumers, or as opponents or as rivals—and neither should we. Each one of us suspects in our heart of hearts that we are something more than the parts we play and the jobs we do. And God, our Shepherd, is the One who can see past the identities we assume and the roles we play to our true selves. This is what is meant when it is said that the Good Shepherd calls the sheep by name.ⁱ

The second image of Jesus offered in today's gospel is that of the *gate* to the sheepfold. In four different verses (1, 2, 7, 9), Jesus is variously described as the gate or way through which the sheep must pass and wherein all who enter will find safety, pasture, and fullness of life. This image would also have been familiar to Jesus' followers and to John's gospel readers. When it was their turn for guarding the sheepfold at night, shepherds would station themselves at the gate of the enclosure. When they rested, they would lie down in the opening, becoming, as it were, the gate, through which no one could enter or leave the sheepfold. Just as the good shepherds of ancient Israel guarded their flocks with their very lives, so also does Jesus. He is the living gate, who gave his life for his sheep. Of course Scripture—and especially the prophets—had long warned of greater dangers to the sheep than the wolf or the bear. The most dangerous predator is human, as we see so tragically in daily suicide bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, or recent massacres in South Sudan—or in the kidnapping of hundreds of Nigerian schoolgirls. The shepherd, we are told, guards the gate and won't let the sheep

come to harm, even if it means he or she gets nailed to it. The shepherds lay down their life for the sheep as did Jesus, and that is how we can tell they are true shepherds.ⁱⁱ

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that all this shepherd, sheepfold, gate and sheep talk comes down to one word: ownership, but not ownership in the sense of legal ownership or possessiveness.ⁱⁱⁱ Rather, we hear people talk about “owning their feelings,” or “owning up to a problem or to their commitments.” When I hear expressions like those and when I put them together with the story of the good shepherd who owns the sheep, I begin to think of ownership as a certain kind of relationship between God and us, and between one another, recognizing that ownership in this sense is about being bound to something or someone beyond ourselves, and about identifying with it so strongly that it becomes part of us. It’s about the situation that *has your name written on it*. So, when they are threatened, we defend people or ideas as if we were defending our own bodies...and sometimes that can get us into trouble.

Now, on this Mother’s Day, we acknowledge the old proverb, “God could not be everywhere, and therefore God made mothers.”^{iv} In that spirit, I want to share some memories of a remarkable woman I knew back in Wilmington, Delaware in the 1990s, where I worked in two inner city churches. The Rev. Lauvinia Dickerson, who, at that time was around seventy-five years old, was the Pastor of the (four hundred member) New Pentecostal United Holy Church. Her church was an immediate neighbor of ours, near my former parish. Pastor Dickerson looked as sweet as Grandma Moses but was tough as nails when she had to be. She was the founding pastor of her church and for more than thirty years she was tireless in her work of building up her church and connecting to the neighborhood and city in significant ways. She was the mother of her church *and* of her neighborhood.

The neighborhood around her church was very distressed, to say the least. When we organized together to rid the street corners of open market drug dealing and get the police out of their cars and into direct relationship with community leaders, Lauvinia led the way. One time just a block from her church, I was with Lauvinia when we saw a drug dealer threaten one of the residents who was just trying to step past the drug sales and get into his house. There had been 130 shootings in the small city of Wilmington that year, most of which were drug related. Drug dealers were well-armed thugs. This resident was no shrinking violet either—he looked like he could handle himself quite well physically if he had to. But at that moment when the drug dealer was threatening him, Lauvinia stepped in between them. She was about half the size of both of them. She stared up at the drug dealer and told him to get off her street, *her* street; and she told him not to talk to the other man that way. The drug dealer erupted, saying “I’m talking to him, not you, woman.” Lauvinia continued to stare at him and said, “Yeah, well, when you’re talking to him, you’re talking to me!” And that drug dealer seemed to shrink all of a sudden, and he walked away! Now, say what you will about altercations like this and the potential for various violent outcomes—this isn’t something most of us would just do. But one thing’s for sure—there is ownership in those statements of hers. And there is a relationship in that, a full willingness to risk one’s own safety in order to

defend someone else's. Not because he couldn't take care of himself, but because she cared for him, she was somehow connected to him, and she knew it.^v

We all deserve someone in our lives who will say "When you're talking to him, you're talking to me," someone who will put herself or himself in harm's way when we're in big danger or trouble. That's not "co-dependence." That is agape, self-giving love, the kind of love the good shepherd practices and teaches. Or, if we don't really know the person in trouble, it's solidarity. Of course, whether it's love or solidarity, we more than often can't just do it all alone, and shouldn't. Nor does every need or situation have *your* name on it. However, the Good Shepherd who died and rose again is the One who strengthens and empowers our inner resolve and courage and enables the strengthening of a whole flock of people to stand together in the midst of many situations and crises—as we did on those street corners back in Wilmington—turning us from sheep to shepherds. One fundamental reason why we gather as a community of faith—as a church—is to build the capacity to act as a mediating institution, a parish of strong relationships, which, along with others, can effectively restore community life, and begin to address effectively corrosive and exploitative realities, both private and public, such as emotional or physical abuse, discrimination, joblessness, lack of affordable housing—and stand with those directly caught up in such struggles and be able to say, "When you're talking to them, you're talking to us."^{vi}

ⁱ It is also said that the sheep follow the shepherd because they know his voice. In the ancient village sheepfold, as each sheep recognized its own particular name or signal, it made its way to its shepherd. Only the shepherd's voice would evoke such a response; and even if they were grazing somewhere with a thousand other sheep—when they were called—they would separate themselves from the crowd and follow *their* shepherd home. The shepherd's flute and voice are, for them, the sounds of safety, food, warmth, and healing, not to mention constancy, care, compassion, and companionship. This pastoral imagery of Jesus as our shepherd challenges us to find ways to listen more attentively and respond to his voice, calling each of us by name.

ⁱⁱ Our gospel alludes to robbers who elude the guard at the door and climb in some other way, or vandals who slaughter for slaughter's sake. Another danger is exploitation, the false shepherd as described by the prophet Ezekiel (34: 1-10) who makes use of the flock for his or her own satisfaction with no regard for the welfare for those in their charge. Jesus and John knew all these dangers as we do today as well. Whatever it all meant to John and his community, today's gospel remains a vital word to us today, living in a pluralistic world. With all the competing claims for our loyalty, Jesus gives us a way to test the pretenders who claim to be shepherds or who are just wolves dressed up in sheep's clothing. Pay attention to how they come at you, Jesus suggests. If they sneak up behind you and reach for your wallet, they are not true shepherds. If they parachute into the fold selling tickets to the Roman coliseum, they are not shepherds.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), p. 81

^{iv} Some have attributed this quote to Rudyard Kipling; others note it is older than that and has been a Jewish proverb for some time.

^v All in all, though, we are warned away from getting involved in other people's problems. We are often told to mind our own business and let other people mind theirs. There is also in each of us at least a slight sense of immobility, amnesia, moral blindness, and a durable and pervasive fear. With all this, we are often powerless, or at least feel powerless, to intercede. And when we do, too often it is after the fact or with no real effect, or in the wrong way. And often we feel way out of our depth when called upon to intercede in personal or community issues, and that feeling of inadequacy leads to other feelings of guilt

and disappointment. Psychology might call it “trespassing boundaries” or “co-dependence,” and there is a point to be made here.

Sometimes our “ownership” of others’ problems can end up crippling both them and us, by eroding each person’s responsibility for their own life. When we make a habit of “rescuing” other people, we may be preventing them from learning about the real life consequences of their actions (Iron rule). We may, in fact, be helping them to keep their illusions and lies about themselves, and we get to be heroes and martyrs in the bargain- but it is not good for them or for us. Everybody deserves a chance to fail. It is how we learn to be human.

^{vi} The good shepherd, Jesus, lays his life down for the sheep. But then, you might ask- what happens to the sheep? Who protects them after the shepherd has died? Well, adapting a portrayal by Barbara Brown Taylor, on the night before Jesus, the shepherd, died, they all fell asleep after a big meal, with the sound of the shepherd’s flute in their ears. And as they dozed off, they shared a terrible nightmare of wolves with clubs and torches who came out of the woods, led their shepherd away, and tore him to shreds on a hillside outside of town. During this nightmare, they huddled for safety, unable to think, unable to move, and they stayed that way for days, wondering if they would starve to death before the wolves came back to finish the job. But then on the third day, they heard a flute- far away at first, then drawing nearer- that woke them from their nightmare, and they stood once again in the presence of their good shepherd. Everything was the same again, yet everything had changed. Looking around at each other, they saw what had happened. They had dozed off as sheep, but they had woken up as shepherds. As they dozed, every one of them had been changed into the image and likeness of the good shepherd, and as they stood there staring at one another, they were handed staves and flutes like the good shepherd’s and were then sent out to gather and tend and protect their own flocks- “Feed my sheep, Do for them as I did for you,” they are told and the shepherd played them a little tune as they set off to do just that. – Taylor, *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.