

Acts 4:5-12

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

Today is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” In each of the three lectionary years, the Fourth Sunday of Easter we have readings talking about Jesus being the Good Shepherd. In the Roman Catholic Church, they say prayers with special intention for those who might be discerning a call into ordained ministry, that there may be new shepherds for Christ's sheep. In the Episcopal Church, we keep the readings but don't keep the same intent. Still, we have the imagery of Christ as the Good Shepherd.

Why shepherd? Most of the twelve, or at least a plurality, were fishermen. Why not Jesus the Good Fisherman? Probably because we think of fishing as being a skill, and we might think that we were saying that Jesus was good at fishing. Good shepherd we tend to hear more in terms of morality rather than ability. Of course, the real reason that we have the imagery of Jesus as Shepherd is because that is the imagery that God uses of Godself in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in Ezekiel. “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.” All of Chapter 34 of Ezekiel is about how Israel had been subjected to bad shepherds, so God will become their shepherd. For Jesus to claim the title of Good Shepherd of Israel is a really big deal. It is nothing less than a claim to be God.

And yeah, we know that, but for the people of First-Century Palestine, this is pretty radical – and blasphemous. Who is he to claim to be God? Besides, God as Good Shepherd comes in the context of really slamming the nominal shepherds of Israel. In Jesus' time, this was the Pharisees. So Jesus is not only saying that he is God, he is saying that the Pharisees are the bad shepherds. It's really no wonder that there were those who wanted to see Jesus dead.

But we shouldn't be too harsh in our judgment of those who initially rejected the notion of Jesus as Christ. Bless their hearts, they thought they were doing the right thing. Here was this guy changing centuries of understanding about what they thought the Scriptures meant, changing the rules, upsetting the status quo, making radical claims about a deeper insight into the nature of God than was on the surface apparent in their reading of Scripture. All that “you have heard it said but I say” stuff. It is tough to open your heart and mind to new ideas and insights, not least of all because it first means admitting that you don't have it all figured out. We know who God is. We know what God likes and doesn't like. And no long-haired Nazarene upstart is going to change our minds.

I sympathize, I really do. How are we to know what is additional revelation and what is heresy? What is new insight into the mind of God and what is blasphemy? The writer of 1 John echoes our Lord's words about laying down one's life for others. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay

down our lives for one another.” We know Jesus' love because he gave himself for us. We can show our love to each other by doing the same. Not that that means literally dying for one another, although that is a possibility. But it definitely means loving each other more than we love our stuff. Laying down our lives doesn't necessarily mean martyrdom, but it does mean having a sense of perspective. “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” So one way to tell that a new teaching is not of God is to see what it says about how we treat one another. Misusing the verse 2 Thessalonians 3:10, for example. That is the one about if you don't work you won't eat. So let's cut food stamps for the poor, whether they have jobs or not doesn't really matter. That isn't what that verse is talking about. Tough love isn't love. Real love is giving of oneself. Being willing to go without to help someone else.

I am very proud to be part of St. James'. I have experienced remarkable generosity in her people. How can I help? What can I do? I feel bad that I don't always have an answer to give. We have been made the stewards of a great deal. As we move forward together, I want to work with the vestry and other lay leaders to find additional ministries that St. James' can engage in or support. We have the potential to do an incredible amount of good for God's kingdom. We just need to figure out what we can do to best use what we have been given. It is a completely different problem than I have ever had in my ordained ministry. Every other situation I can remember has been being one of survival. How do we pay the bills? Now it is what to do with all that we have. It's a nice problem to have, let me tell you.

None of which is to say that you can slack up on your pledges. We aren't doing *that* great. But because of your willingness to share, we can do so much more than just keep the lights on. And that's the whole point. There are more sheep to feed, to seek out, to care for. Unlike in the agricultural world, in the world of the church, sheep become shepherds. We who have been cared for and fed by the body and blood of our shepherd are empowered to go out to those other flocks, to bring them into the fold as our Lord said. For the sheep know the shepherd's voice. We are the means through which that voice is heard.

We go into the world to be Christ to the world. To be his hands, his feet, his voice. To seek out his sheep, to feed them, to protect them, to tend to them, that they may know the one true shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord. This we do in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*