

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
22 April 2018

Scripture readings:

Acts 4:5-12 Psalm 23 1 John 3:16-24 John 10:11-18

Today is multi-layered in the life of the Church and the Church's concern and in the life of the world. Today is Earth Day. It's worth remembering that as Christian people we acknowledge that we have a responsibility as stewards of our Mother Earth, and that we can make a difference in either caring for or abusing the earth.

Today in Rome the pope announced that he ordained to the priesthood sixteen (and of course they were men), and, God bless his little heart, he came to his window where he does his *Angelus* - which you know I get up to watch on Sundays - and he was accompanied by four of those freshly ordained men. Today in the life of the universal Roman Catholic Church is a day of vocation to the priesthood. I thought what a perfect day for our friend Mark Newman to be ordained, so that made that connection particularly significant for me and I trust for all of us.

And then I am aware, as you are, that because of the texts today, this is known by some as Good Shepherd Sunday. I had nothing to do with the choice of artwork in the leaflet for today, but guess what we got? I couldn't have asked for better! The illustration is the 19th century understanding of Jesus in every stained glass window in every Protestant Church in Christendom in the 19th century of Jesus depicted as a bearded lady in a bathrobe with three poodles. *[laughter]*

I have told you the story of that very depiction of Jesus in my home congregation. When it came time to replace the windows, it was an acre-sized window that was replaced with a re-interpretation of the same shepherd, but the new depiction was of a young man - too young to grow a beard - in a short tunic that had been ripped and patched, in sandals tied up to his knee and with, instead of three freshly groomed poodles, a lamb over his shoulder, holding in his right and left hands the front and rear legs of that beast.

I know I have shared this with you before, but I think it bears repeating - that I didn't know much about lambs until James and I bought our house out here, and in the field next to us was Ben, an old ram who was dumb and dirty and he refused to obey property boundaries and often visited our garden. *[laughter]* I suppose he had his role in life as - at least sometimes - a stud, but I can tell you this: what I learned in a hurry was I would never put a lamb over my shoulder and get the nether parts of that filthy beast anywhere near my face.

But this is a part of understanding this image of Jesus as a good shepherd. The gospel makes it very clear that as a shepherd, Jesus is not a hired hand, that his relationship with those for whom he cares is intimately and profoundly related to his relationship with his Creator God. And Jesus' relationship with God is a personal and loving one - which was contrary to many of the religious ideas of the day.

There are references in scripture where Jesus refers to himself or is referred to as a door. I've heard it explained, and I have no reason to believe that it's not the case, that sheep folds were sometimes fences of rock high enough for them not to jump over, which are contiguous circular affairs with one entry way for access and egress, and when all of the sheep were gathered inside of that fold, the shepherd - him or herself - would lie down in that opening to protect the sheep from their own idiocy of getting out and becoming less safe than they were inside *and* from the ravaging and ravenous wolves who would come and attack them. So the shepherd, in fact, put himself in mortal danger to protect the flock.

Now to these eleven words which I profoundly love and which I think are more important to the Church than we sometimes give them credit for. Just listen to them carefully once more: "*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.*" I have other sheep who are on the other side of this wall. I have other sheep who are not protected this way. I have other sheep who may not know the same love that I have known and shown to you, but they are my sheep, and if you call me your shepherd (which comes easily to us, doesn't it?), then you have to believe, know, and come to understand that there are others on the other side of this wall outside of this fold, who are mine also. Period.

Much of religious hypocrisy has to do with the kind of religion that understands this and it's wrong: "*It's just you and me, Jesus, against the rest of the god-damned world.*" That's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying, "*Yes, you are my sheep, and so are they.*"

Now why do I find that so important? Because it means if we're going to love Jesus as we profess we do (I'm

not really good at that) or (I'm better at this one) I believe that Jesus loves me even though I'm unlovable. Take your choice. If I'm going to believe that Jesus can possibly love me, I'd better darn well not be in the business of professing that Jesus can't love somebody else - for whatever reason. And you know you're good at coming up with those reasons. *Jesus couldn't possibly love them because they eat the wrong things and wear the wrong things. They worship the wrong way. They don't subscribe to my creed. They don't believe what I believe. Jesus couldn't possibly forgive them of their sins because mine are so much more forgivable.* Hogwash! Lovable little ram that you are - with the filthy nether parts that I wouldn't get anywhere near my face!

We have a shepherd who loves us completely and entirely on this side of the wall and inside this flock without question. And these eleven simple words remind us that when we claim and believe and teach and benefit from that love, we know that that same love belongs to others who are not of this fold and who are on the other side of any wall.

I have heard it said, "*His sermons are too political.*" I haven't said a word about politics. I talk about scripture, about Jesus, and what we believe in that Christ. But it matters in a world in which decisions make a difference. It matters in a world in which our decisions have an effect on our relationships with others. And it matters in terms of our relationship with God. What, dear friends, is the good news we have to share with others - that we have a Lord who is shepherd of *all* the sheep - even, or perhaps especially, those who are not of this fold. And for the Church that means women and men. It means people of color as well as white people. It means people who are disadvantaged and under-privileged as well as the wealthy. It means *all* people. It means us, friends. It means you and me, and that is the Christian message, and you'd better darn well believe it's political.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.