

Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday, April 21, 2024

Today Jesus tells us he is the Good Shepherd. He says he's different from hired hands, because he lays down his life for the sheep. St. John, in his letter, repeats this and says that's how we know God loves us, because he lays down his life for us. And he didn't lay down his life for humanity in general, but for each of us in particular. One of the things I find most beautiful about this gospel is Jesus' assurance that he knows us and lets us know him. A little earlier, he says he calls his sheep by name. I find that very comforting.

It means a lot to us when someone actually knows who we are, doesn't it? I used to belong to a world wide organisation called Art of Living that teaches breathing and meditation. The world leader, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, had come to Canada several times and I'd met him, perhaps the most loving person I've ever met. I remember one visit really wanting to know that he knew who I was, knew my name, out of all the millions he'd met. One day, he was walking by, with his usual crowd of people following him, just like Jesus, I always thought, and he stopped to talk to me and he addressed me by name. And oh, it felt good. To be known, recognised, valued enough to be taken account of. It's so important to us. And Jesus says he knows us by name, knows each one of us through and through. And loves us enough to lay down his life for us.

It's hard to get our heads around that sometimes. I don't know very many people who would be willing to die for me. There might be some. I know quite a few people who are willing to spend their lives for me, spending time with me, caring for me. Which is something I usually need more than someone to die for me, actually. There are quite a few people I'm willing to make sacrifices for. And some I'd die for, too. And Jesus tells us that he loves us all that much. That's pretty major.

The other thing that I think is beautiful in this passage, but also a bit hard for us to get our heads around, is where Jesus says, "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." You know, we human beings, like animals, tend to be territorial and clannish, just attached to Our People. When I lived on Robie St., I used to feed the crows every morning. Crows are suspicious birds, but they got to know me, about 5 of them, and they'd come when I called and some of them got quite tame and would stay quite close to me, and even follow me on my walks. It was kind of sweet, except when they pecked my head to get me to give them treats.

But every now and then, crows from a different family group would show up! Oh, boy! Then the feathers would fly! They'd chase after each other, cawing and squawking and dive bombing each other and chase each other away. They'd forget about the food I was giving them, forget everything except getting rid of these strangers. They could have shared. There was plenty of food.

I have to admit I know very little about sheep, but I've heard that sheep also can do that, if the shepherd introduces new sheep into the flock, they sometimes don't let them eat. I've seen it happen with cats. Our very elderly cat, Jessie, was so arthritic she could

barely move, nearly blind, nearly deaf. One day my cousin came over with her year-old cat. Jessie started growling really deep in her throat and I think she would have attacked the kitten if I hadn't picked her up. She wanted at him. He was an invader in her house.

I'm afraid we humans can be just as bad. We are suspicious of people who are not "one of us." I remember when we moved to Lockeport. Lockeport is mostly built on a small island, attached to the mainland by a causeway. You reach it by a loop road off the highway and it's about half an hour from the nearest town. All along the loop road are other smaller communities. The nearest one to Lockeport was East Green Harbour. Actually, it started just the other side of the causeway. When we first got there, people told us to watch out for the people from East Green Harbour. "They're not like us," they said. They added some unflattering things that are not politically correct to repeat. I'll tell you, they seemed pretty much the same to us.

West Green Harbour, about 10 minutes up the road, was just the same. It was a community of 80 households along a road to the wharf, off the loop road. And a side road led off it. And the people before the side road weren't like the ones past it, much less those who lived on the side road. One person who'd been brought up "up the road" bought a house "down the road" and the family furor that arose! "Why would you do that? You don't want to live there. They're not like us."

Many of you have told me how in your youths it was a terrible thing to marry a Roman Catholic. Families would split up over it. My Mom, who was a Roman Catholic, also got some flack for marrying a Protestant. Lillian Ferguson told me that when she was confirmed, at age 13, in this church, the priest tried to make her sign a promise never to marry anyone except an Anglican. We can laugh at that now, mostly, but we still have the same attitude, by and large, to people of other religions, non-Christians.

The early disciples were no better. Jesus broke all these rules. He consistently treated everyone more or less the same, whether they were rich or poor, Jews or Samaritans or Gentiles, men or women or children. And his disciples didn't get it.

We've been watching *The Chosen* and they really act this out. They kind of flesh out the Bible stories, give you an idea what it might have been like. The Bible doesn't talk much, just a little, about the quarrelling between the disciples, but I expect it was there. Jockeying for position, for who would be closest to Jesus. In the movie, Jesus calls the fishermen, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, John, and not long after he calls the tax collector, Matthew. He's what you might call a lapsed Jew. In the movie, he's the one who collected the fishermen's taxes, for the Romans, and they hate him. And they don't get over that overnight. And yet, even so, when Jesus heads down towards Jerusalem and decides to go through Samaria instead of around it, it's Matthew who raises an objection, not wanting to go near "those people." The others don't want to either. Jesus goes anyway.

After the Resurrection, it took the early church quite a while to accept Gentiles without making them convert. It took a vision to Simon Peter, repeated three times, and an angel visiting a Centurion and pouring the Spirit onto them when Peter was still there so he

couldn't argue with it. And this in spite of the fact that Jesus had done a preaching tour through Gentile lands, fed 4000 mostly Gentiles, healed numerous Gentiles and so on. They didn't get it. Even after Peter's vision, it took them a while to really accept it.

We have such a hard time really believing that Jesus the Good Shepherd actually calls and welcomes and knows by name everyone. Sometimes it's hard enough to believe that he welcomes us and loves us. Believing that he welcomes and loves people we don't even know or, worse, people we don't like, is even harder. We have a hard time remembering that he's the shepherd and we're just the sheep. He's the one who gets to decide who is part of the flock and who isn't. Not us. Our job is to accept the sheep he sends and share our food with them nicely.

Jesus says in this passage that he is looking for the day when there will be one flock and one shepherd. When we are all one, unified in him. But it's a hard road to get us there because that doesn't come naturally to us. If we examine our hearts, we will probably find that there is at least one group of people that we don't really believe Jesus loves. A group we don't want to love and welcome. A group we're prejudiced against. All of us. In fact, the church has taught this from time to time. I've heard preachers say, "God hates...." This group or that group. And you know what? They're just wrong. God doesn't hate anyone. Jesus never turned anyone away and nor should we. It's not up to us to judge each other. It's only up to us to love each other, as St. John says in his letter today. To love each other in truth and deed as well as word.

One of the signs of Christian maturity, of our truly beginning to grow into the full stature of Christ, is our ability to love people. People who are not like us. And people who are like us, of course, which is sometimes just as hard! Everyone. Jesus says that people will know we are Christians by our love. Emmanuel church is known for our welcoming spirit. We are an affirming church. We try to welcome everyone, regardless of their gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, background, abilities, disabilities, economic status. None of that matters. What matters is that they have walked through our doors, into Jesus' church, and we welcome them, trusting the shepherd who sent them to know what he's doing. And after a while, we discover we have a lot more in common than we might have thought originally. Actually, they really are like us! Isn't that true? So congratulations on being welcoming! Keep it up!

There's one thing that keeps coming up in the movie, The Chosen. The disciples disagree about all sorts of things, and quarrel about them, but they keep referring it back to Jesus. He'll tell us. Ask Jesus. Wait and see what Jesus says. They trust him and keep following him, even though they don't understand him. Well, that's what we need to do, too: trust Jesus, refer things back to Jesus, let Jesus be the boss, the judge. Our job, as St. John reminds us today, is to believe in him and love one another. And he says that when we do that, we will abide in him and he in us. His Spirit will be here with us.

And we can trust the Spirit to guide us, help us get along, help us to let go of our own prejudices and love those whom Jesus loves, whoever he gathers together in his name. If we, like good sheep, listen for his voice and follow him, we won't go astray. His rod and his

staff will comfort us and he will prepare a table before us, even in the presence of our enemies. He will anoint our head with oil and make our cups run over. Goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.