

## Sheep into Shepherds: Good Shepherd Sunday at St. Martin's<sup>1</sup>

April 25, 2021

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"I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." I don't know ... I think folks have trouble identifying with sheep. I mean, sheep're not too bright ... you know what I mean? I mean ... who wants to be a sheep!

On the other hand ... maybe there is something comforting ... something sort-of compelling about being nudged along – shepherded and looked after ... and claimed.

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A dear friend of mine recently gave me a little paperback book written by a guy named Phillip Keller who, among other things, was an outdoor enthusiast and at one time actually raised sheep on a ranch in British Columbia. Keller wrote this little book titled A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 – from a shepherd's point of view. He described the extreme effort and at times personal peril ... the physical strain that goes into caring for sheep – to keep them healthy, to feed and look after them – he looked at that actually as a metaphor for God's care for His people.

Well with that, let's turn and think about this morning's reading from John.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." 'Course when you think about it, that's what makes the good shepherd good, isn't it? What makes the good shepherd good is his willingness to get involved, to risk even his own life for the life of his flock. His flock. Not someone else's flock that he gets paid five bucks an hour to look after, but his own flock – the one he's bought and bred, nurtured and protected. He's invested in it, in so many ways ... 'cause they're his.

'Course for one thing, the sheep are the shepherds' livelihood – that's true. But I think – and Keller writes about this – they're also in a way ... in a way like family. 'Cause the sheep know their shepherd's walk. They know his touch, they know his voice. And apparently that's the sound of safety for them – the sound of still waters, the sound of green pastures.

And then for the shepherd ... on the shepherd's part, a good shepherd learns to tell a bleat of pain from one of pleasure, while the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue means food, and a two-note sound on a shepherd's flute means that it's time to go home.

So I do think there's something about ownership that creates intimacy – especially ownership of living things. I mean, like your dog ... your cat ... becomes your soul friend, your dear friend who knows how you're feeling when no one else really does ... becomes so much a part of your life that sometimes it's not easy to tell who owns whom. So I also think maybe ownership ... maybe ownership is a kind of relationship ... a bond ... one that's created between people and other people – metaphorically speaking – we don't actually own each other! Or a bond between people and animals ... or even between people and special, nostalgic things.

So maybe ownership's not about mere possession, but about being bound to something beyond yourself. About identifying with it so strongly that it becomes part of you. And so when it's threatened,

you defend it as if you're defending your very own self. And sometimes that can get you into a bit of trouble.

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Someone I know was visiting a friend of his out in California a while back. Seems they met at the airport, and as they were getting into the car to leave, my friend opened his doors so wide that it whacked the sideview mirror of a red sports car parked next to it. Now there was absolutely no harm done, not the slightest scratch. ... But unfortunately ... the owner of that red Jaguar just happened to be sitting inside it at the time. And when he heard that whack, he exploded out his driver's door.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled at my startled friend. At which point his friend jumped out of his side of the car and said, "Don't you talk to him like that! It was an accident, for crying out loud! And you can see for yourself that nothing's scratched."

"I'm talkin' to him, buster, not you!" the man said furiously. "Yeah, well, when you're talkin' to him, you're talkin' to me! You're talkin' to me," my friend's friend said. And then with that, the Jaguar guy backed down.

Well, say what you will about brawls in airport parking lots, there's ownership in that statement. "When you're talkin' to him, You're talkin' to me!" And I do think there's a kind of intimacy ... a sort-of bonding in that – a willingness to risk yourself to defend someone else. Not because he can't necessarily take care of himself, but because you care about him: You're connected to him, and you know it.

## II

Well of course we're warned about sticking our noses into other folks' business, aren't we? Parents tell you to mind your own business ... don't talk to strangers ... keep your eyes to yourself. Therapists call it respecting boundaries, and they have a point ... they have a point. I mean, sometimes your owning of others' problems – your constant need to rescue others – your need to be a hero – can wind up crippling both them and you, eroding ownership of your own life. As someone's said, "everybody deserves a chance to fail, it's how you learn to be human."

OK. But maybe ... maybe you also deserve to have someone in your life who'll say, "When you're talkin' to him ... when you're talkin' to her ... you're talkin' to me!" And I do not think that's codependence. No, I think it's called love, self-giving love, the kind of love that the Good Shepherd practices ... the kind of love He teaches you and me to also practice.

## III

Well back to Jesus' metaphor here: Maybe a hired hand would take one look at a struggling sheep caught in the underbrush or wandering away to be lost from the flock ... or who maybe looked at that bully in the airport parking lot ... and said, "I'm outta here!" Or I guess if he was a "religious" hired hand he might have said, "God bless you! I'll pray for you!" as he high-tails it out ... minding his own business, taking care of number one!

But getting back to the Gospel, the good shepherd – our Good Shepherd – stands between danger and the flock with staff raised, willing to lay down his very life if need be.

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But here's my question and the point I want to make this morning: Who protects the sheep – after that first Easter? Who protects the sheep after that Good Shepherd's gone?

Well ... I'll tell you. 'Cause this ... finally is my take-home message. But let me first fill your imagination with a dream. Imagine that on the night before Jesus dies, His followers all fall asleep in a garden – fall asleep after a big meal, with the sound of a Shepherd's flute in their ears. And as they sleep, they share a terrible dream – a dream of wolves with clubs and torches who come out of the woods, lead their Shepherd away, and tear Him to shreds on a hill outside of town. And in that dream they huddle for safety, unable to think, unable to move. And they stay that way for three whole days, wondering if they'll starve to death before the wolves come back to finish the job.

But then on a third day, they hear a familiar Shepherd's flute – at first far away, but then drawing near – a Shepherd's song that wakes them from their sleep. And they stand again in the presence of their Good Shepherd. And now everything is the same again. But everything has also changed.

'Cause gazing around at each other, they see what has happened. They have fallen asleep as sheep ... but they have awakened ... they have all awakened ... as shepherds.

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And so finally: What does it mean to be a shepherd in a world made new by the Good Shepherd's death? What does that mean for you ... for me ... following our Shepherd? Well, maybe it means being willing to stand between the bullies and the weak ones, between the hatemongers and the powerless, between the marginalized and those who hate those who are different – different color, different class, different kind. Maybe it means protecting the weak, protecting the isolated, protecting the stranger, protecting the alien. Maybe it means standing up – to stand between the human predator, the racist, the bigot, the anti-Semite, the liar, the verbal abuser, the gay basher ... standing between the hatemongers of the world and their human prey.

So – my point. The sheep woke up and found out they were now shepherds. 'Cause as they slept, every last one of them had been transformed ... transfigured into the image of their Good Master. And as they stood there staring at each other, their Good Shepherd handed them staffs just like His, and sent them out to gather their own flocks. He said, "Do for them as I did for you."

And then ... and then ... He played them a little song on his Shepherd's flute as they set off ... to do ... just that.

Amen.

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1. Resources used: *John*, by Gerard Sloyan (Interpretation Series); *Bread of Angels* by Barbara Vrown Taylor ("The Shepherd's Flute"); *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* by W. Phillip Keller, 2007.