

Fourth Sunday in Easter: Good Shepherd Sunday
May 3, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

There is an old story told about someone who went to the movies one day and notices what looks like a sheep sitting in the next seat over.

Surprised, the movie-goer asks, "Are you a sheep?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing at the movies?"

The sheep replies, "Well, I liked the book."

I open with a joke that imagines that sheep are more intelligent than we give them credit for.

Now to be honest, I don't really know how dumb sheep are. I do know it's pretty much conventional wisdom to say they are. But this past week, I've come across expert opinions that make the case both ways.

Some folks, claiming first-hand experience, insist that sheep are filthy and thick-headed and prone to putting themselves in perilous situations – unnecessarily and foolishly. One sermon, entitled "God Loves Us Dirty Sheep," says sheep are filthy and suicidal and stupid. Near the middle, the preacher says:

We are dirty sheep and our very being tangles to all sorts of undesirable things.
We don't ever seem to notice because, like feces on wool, our sin slowly clumps together.ⁱ

That preacher says God loves us all the same, but ... it paints an unattractive picture of sheep.

So, yes, some first-hand accounts says that sheep are dumb. But I've come across a couple others who insist it isn't true.

Barbara Brown Taylor, for one, writes about who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest who explained to her that sheep aren't dumb at all. "It is the cattle ranchers who ... spread that ugly rumor, and all because sheep do not behave like cows."ⁱⁱ They're not dim, in other words, just misunderstood.

As I've said, I don't really know that much about sheep. Not personally. Not first-hand. But this time around at least, I'm inclined to give sheep the benefit of the doubt. After all, I do know a thing or two about people, and though Jesus, in this morning's gospel, talks in terms of sheep, his concern is for people; he's not really talking about sheep (we know that), he's talking about people like you and like me. And it's clear to me that Jesus holds us in high regard.

One of the reasons why sheep are said to be dumb – so I'm told – is because they're "prey animals," not "predators," and so their instincts can seem counterintuitive from our point of view. They're given to being afraid, and sometimes behave in ways that seem unwise to us.

Oh, but that actually makes me a bit more sympathetic towards them. It suggests that maybe we have more in common with frightened sheep than we typically imagine.

Perhaps you've seen some of the cautionary tales about scammers who are taking advantage of human fears in this season of COVID-19. A recent article I read insisted that falling for a scam isn't a sign of stupidity; scammers are just very clever about bypassing our thinking brains.ⁱⁱⁱ And we're softer targets nowadays, because there is something real to fear.

Thieves and bandits. They're named explicitly in this morning's gospel. They're the ones who take advantage; they leave people less than when they found them. Or as Jesus sums it up, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy."

Notice that Jesus never criticizes the sheep. He reserves all his criticism and condemnation for the leaders, the shepherds.

And I think it breaks Jesus' heart.

That's my sense of why he speaks so encouragingly of a shepherd who is the opposite, one who seeks only the good of the sheep. "I came," Jesus says, "that they may have life, and have it abundantly" ... that "they could live life to the fullest" (as one translation puts it).^{iv}

I hear nothing but compassion in those words. Certainly no recriminations, no hint that the sheep are to blame for what others do to their harm. He's come to offer another way to live, to invite us to live life to the fullest – life as described in our reading from Acts this morning, where the followers of Jesus all take care of one another.

There's a backstory here. Just before the start of the 10th chapter of John, the 9th chapter of John told us a story of a man born blind, an outcast from the start – forced to beg for his daily bread – abandoned with nobody caring for him. Even Jesus' disciples assumed he deserved his lot in life.

Jesus rejected the notion, as you might recall, telling them that the man deserved their compassion and their help, not their judgment. And Jesus showed the kind of compassion he could offer by giving the man his sight.

And then the religious leaders interrogated the man. They asked him who gave him his sight. He said he didn't know his name, but that he must have been a prophet. They disagreed.

In point of fact, they didn't like any of the answers he gave them that day. And in the end, those in charge disapproved of him so strongly that they excommunicated him.

But when Jesus learned that the man had been driven out from his own community, left once more to fend for himself, Jesus sought him out. He brought him into his own circle, made him part of the sheepfold of his followers.

Jesus speaks in terms of thieves and robbers, but he's talking about the religious leaders who abandon those for whom they should offer care and support. And speaks in terms of sheep and shepherds, but it's all just commentary on how those who should care others do harm instead; they leave the sheep worse off in the end.

And Jesus says he's come to tend to the sheep – because he cares for the sheep. So he's come to seek out the lost and offer them a place of safety.

“Jesus used this figure of speech,” John says, “but they did not understand what he was saying to them.” And we've got to wonder just who the “they” is ... the “they” who don't understand. Who doesn't want to understand?

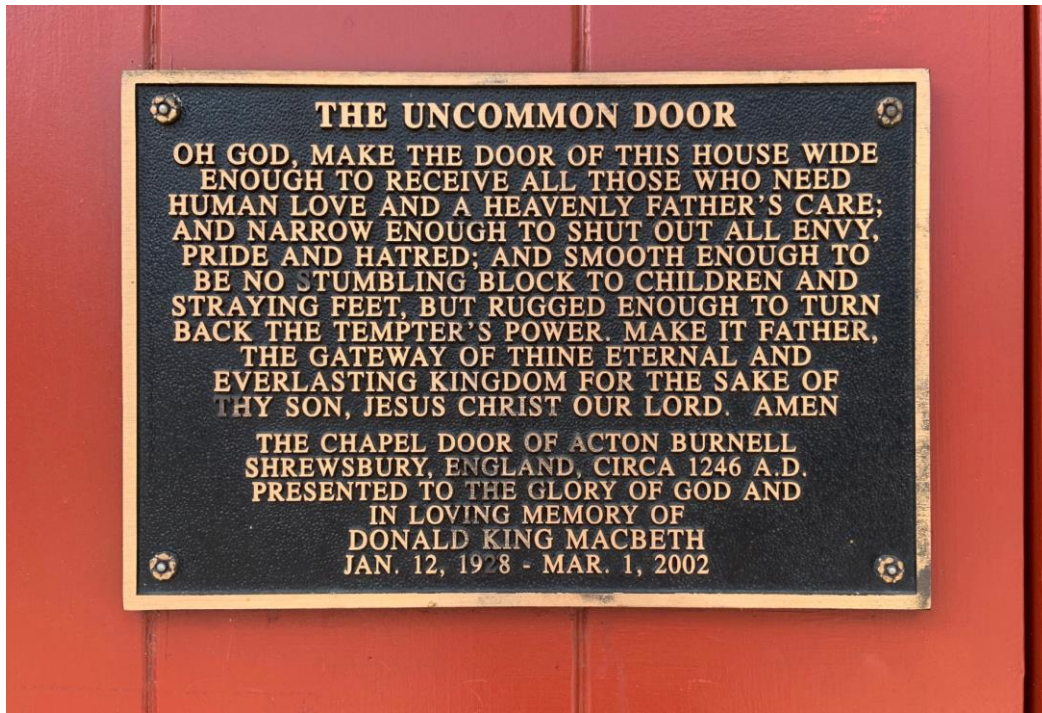
So John tells us Jesus tries again, this time saying, “I am the gate for the sheep.”

I'm not sure mixing these metaphors helps much. There are those in our own day, after all, who want to turn this image of a gate into a narrow entrance that would limit God's care to some, leaving others out in the cold – which seems a perversion of Jesus' use of the image here. They make it about salvation, those who get saved and those who don't. The only way into God's good graces, they say, is to believe in Jesus.

But that's hardly Jesus' point. He makes no distinctions here. He makes no distinctions between good sheep and bad sheep, sheep who decide for Jesus and those who don't.

No, the way he uses the image, there's not a hint about salvation and eternal rewards. Jesus is a gate that opens up to offer a way in for any who need a safe place to spend the night.

I'm reminded of the plaque on our front door here. You may have paused to read it some Sunday morning. In my mind (though I may not have this right) the plaque goes back to when Bill Ellis was rector here, and this congregation – like so many across the Episcopal Church was wrestling with how wide our welcome was. This plaque affirms a wideness of God's welcome.



Jesus says, "I am the gate." It could be translated, "I am the door."

And the point is that this is a door that doesn't lock anyone out. It welcomes everyone in, even as it insists that the place within be a place of welcome and safety for all God's children.

And Jesus says all this, I remind you, because he actually holds us in high regard. We're like God's sheep, and that's not a put-down; it's rather the opposite.

I've been pondering how the Bible speaks of sheep. And I won't pretend that I've done an exhaustive search, but I haven't come up with a putdown anywhere in either Old or New Testaments. (Barbara Brown Taylor may be right: that's just an "ugly rumor" started by cattle ranchers ... or maybe cows.) Sheep may get lost, they may stray, but they are never debased.

Sheep are highly esteemed, whereas shepherds ... well, that's another story. In both the Old and the New Testaments, shepherds are often criticized for failing to uphold their responsibilities. Old Testament prophets criticize shepherds – kings – for fleecing the sheep rather than providing food for them. Jesus, this morning, criticizes the religious leaders in his day for abandoning sheep, leaving them on their own in the midst of wolves.

Good shepherds, on the other hand, tend and care for their sheep. It's a virtue in the ancient world precisely because sheep are so critically important, so highly valued.

Jesus is both the shepherd who seeks us out and the gate who welcomes us home.

Jesus says all he wants is for us to “live life to the fullest.” And he says we know how to live it. All we have to do is listen carefully. “You know me.”

Jesus is confident in our ability to tell the difference between the voices that call out to us, confident that we can hear his voice above the clamor of any other.

It’s an astonishing confidence, one that doesn’t seem entirely deserved. After all, we all have a remarkable proclivity for wandering off on our own. And we are so easily frightened and distracted.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that sheep have to learn the idiosyncratic language of their own shepherd: “a cluck of the tongue means food ... a two-note song means that it is time to go home.”^v

And yet she, too, has confidence that we can hear the voice of the Shepherd who cares for us. And she offers these words of encouragement to sheep like you and me:

... if sometimes you have trouble hearing the voice of your shepherd, be patient with yourself – because some days it sounds like a whistle and some days like a cluck; some days it sound like a love song and some days like a curse. It is not a voice that always speaks in words, much less complete sentences, but it can usually be heard sometime between your getting up and your lying down each day, leading you beside the still waters, restoring your soul.^{vi}

Listen for that voice that leads us to still places ... and away from places where we are unsettled. Listen for the voice that restores our souls. For that is the voice of our Shepherd.

Listen for the voice that calls us by name, the voice that names us God’s beloved.

Listen for the voice that says that all are welcomed within the arms of God’s loving embrace.

Listen for the voice that teaches us that the way of love is the way that leads to life – life for you and for me, life for one and for all (not just for some) – for abundant life, life lived to the fullest.

ⁱ Mark Baughman @ <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/dirty-sheep-mike-baughman-05-06-2014>.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Voice of the Shepherd,” in *The Preaching Life* (Cowley Publications, Boston/Cambridge, 1993), p. 140.

ⁱⁱⁱ Doug Shadel, “Please Don’t Get Emotional,” in *AARP The Magazine* (April/May 2020, Volume 63, Number 3B), p. 28.

^{iv} I came so that they could have life – indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest. (John 10:10, *Common English Bible*)

^v Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Voice of the Shepherd,” in *The Preaching Life* (Cowley Publications, Boston/Cambridge, 1993), p. 141.

^{vi} Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Voice of the Shepherd,” in *The Preaching Life* (Cowley Publications, Boston/Cambridge, 1993), p. 145.