

## **“The Good Sheep of the Good Shepherd”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

April 25, 2021 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

Today, the focus of our service is on Jesus as the Good Shepherd. But Jesus was not only the Good Shepherd; he was one of the sheep. He was a faithful, devout, active member of his religious community. Through his life, God knows what it is to be one of the sheep, or as Scott Black Johnston, senior pastor at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, puts it, “God knows people from up close, ...knows exactly what it is like to be a sheep, and by extension, what it is like to be snatched up by the wolf.” Through Christ, God has solidarity with us, and knows well the joys and costs of sheep-life.

And because Jesus knows what it is to be a good sheep, he knows what is needed to be the good, caring shepherd. Like a good shepherd, Jesus leads us to green pastures, beside quiet waters, calls us to return when we wander away from the flock, and journeys with us whenever we find ourselves traversing through the valleys when the shadows of death surround us. And the shepherd’s voice is always present with us, comforting us in moments of sadness or sorrow and teaching us to come closer in fellowship with God and fellow sheep and to find peace.

And the Good Shepherd guides us into welcoming into our peace-producing presence “other sheep.” In the original context of Jesus’ teaching in the gospel, these other sheep were likely understood as the gentiles that were to be welcomed into the one flock of God’s Jesus-following people, but the greater principle offered here is that the sheep of God’s flock are to be hospitable and welcoming of outsiders of any kind. The other sheep we are to welcome are the “others.”

Sometimes, we've been welcoming of the others. Sadly, though, throughout more of our history in the Christian Church, we have rejected, cast out, and caused harm to those we consider to be others. All too often, our creeds have been used not to unite us in faith, or to celebrate what we have in common, but to determine who we consider to be a heretic other and unwelcome within the flock. And as within the many different traditions within the Christian tradition, denominations and communities of faith have separated themselves from one another based on differences of belief, practice, or polity.

What I believe our Good Shepherd is calling us to do, however, is not to separate ourselves from those we consider to be different, but to recognize that we are all sheep of the same flock; to practice generous hospitality with one another; to offer an extravagant welcome to all those who we have othered; to see a unified flock of many colors, shapes, and sizes as being beautiful and blessed; and to celebrate the rich diversity that exists within our religious tradition not as a curse, but as a wonderful gift of God.

We are also called, I believe, to broaden our view concerning who is part of God's flock to include all the children of God around the world, for all of us in the one human family are part of God's beloved flock, or as 19<sup>th</sup> century French preacher Jean-Baptiste Lacordaire taught, "We are leaves of one branch, the drops of one sea, the flowers of one garden."

We are one flock, and so our message to our fellow sheep should always be one of love and concern, for we belong to one another and should take care of each other. Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner, writes, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life

is not death, it's indifference.” The Good Shepherd was not all indifferent, but was actively concerned for others, especially those considered to unclean, untouchable, outcast, or otherwise lowly, and following Jesus requires of us to be likewise concerned for one another and all of God’s children. Especially for those who have been othered in some way, for those who have been unwelcome or outcast, we should never be indifferent, but always be deeply concerned. Shepherding one another in this way is an essential part of the job of being good sheep.

So let us take on this job and be the good sheep of the Good Shepherd. Let us be actively concerned for the lowly and welcoming of those who have been othered. Wherever people are not treated with dignity or respect, as many of our sisters and brothers of African, Asian, and Pacific Islander descent have been throughout the history our nation, let us use whatever resources we may have to enact change that lifts up these fellow sheep and makes our society more just. Wherever the rights of people are threatened, as they are now in several US states for many of our LGBTQ siblings, especially trans youth, let us be outspoken and engaged in protecting one another. Let us support efforts to reform the culture in policing and other areas of public service in our country in ways that better serve and protect all of the public, especially people of color, who all too often continue to experience horrific acts of unnecessary violence at the hands of too many who have sworn to protect them. Let us be accountable for our own actions and encourage the development of a society where the powerful are effectively held to account as well.

We will then have a more just community, more of what Martin Luther King described as “the beloved community,” where all God’s sheep may safely graze in peace. May this be our vision and our mission, and may God and the world be blessed by our sheeply work this day. Amen.