

Easter 4, May 15, 2011
Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, Peter 2:19-25, John 10:1-10

*Too soon we rise; we go our several ways; the feast, **though not the love**, is past and gone, the bread, the wine consumed; yet all our days thou still art here with us—our Shield and Sun. Amen.*

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Later on in Acts it says, “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions but everything they owned was held in common.” Life and death, sickness and health, wealth and poverty, wisdom and ignorance, righteousness and evil, all of these are held in common in the reality of the life we share. It is only an illusion that we are insulated and isolated from other living beings on the planet. Everything we own, everything that happens to us, everything we are, is held or withheld in common.

And so, into our common life come the Good Shepherd and the hired hand. Surely one difference between them is that the Good Shepherd knows the sheep and knows that the sheep belong to her or him. The hired hand believes the sheep belong to somebody else.

It is disturbing when owners of business, land, government or public institutions assume no more responsibility than a hired hand toward the persons who are directly affected by their decisions and actions. The question is not “who gets to be the Good Shepherd?” the question is “Who is *will do what a Good Shepherd does?*” Who is in relationship with the sheep not to use and to spend but to build and to heal? Do we use our resources, including our money, to heal and bring hope? Do we participate in the ongoing work of creation so that people can rebuild their lives where there has been chaos and destruction? Do we invite each other to participate in transformation, individual and social? Jay Wright Cook who will join the ministry of the baptized today with each and every one of us, is called to follow the Good Shepherd and be a Good Shepherd to all children of God who will ever cross his path.

Sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd and they respond to particular words or signals. They may mingle at the watering hole with the sheep of other flocks, but when their own shepherd gives the familiar signal, they easily separate from the other sheep to follow their shepherd. Their familiar shepherd can walk through the sleeping flock without the slightest stir, whereas a stranger will cause pandemonium. Spreading a table before the sheep refers to clearing the feeding pasture of poisonous weeds or scorpion nests.

Like sheep that know their shepherd's voice from the time they are lambs, we have voice recognition at the moment of birth for the voices we have heard from our mother's womb. So too, I believe each of us are born with voice recognition for I AM WHO AM, which is probably why some of us reject implicit or explicit teachings about the Holy One and about Jesus, which do not resonate with that intimate voice in our depths.

It is important who we say Jesus is when we insist that he is the gate or the light or the way. It is important who we say Jesus is when we say that it is good to follow him. You may notice in the Acts of the Apostles that the followers of Jesus are regularly

imprisoned and sometimes killed. They are not the ones who *do* the killing or put others in prison. They recoil from killing and violence as a good shepherd recoils from leading the sheep into danger. Proclaiming that it had been wrong to kill Jesus was all it took to provoke the stoning of Stephen to death.

Another mark of the followers of Jesus is the coexistence and equality in the community of rich and poor, gentiles and Jews, women and men, slave and free. The early church struggled over the inclusion of gentiles among Jewish followers of Jesus. Eventually Peter came around to seeing that God shows no partiality and welcomes all people equally. He has a vision of everyone eating everything, kosher or not, and eating together, Jews and gentiles. In the midst of a culture of shame, exclusion and separation, he apprehended the truth that we are equal and our lives are in common. It is by the grace of God that we see something so counter to all we live with from day to day.

Jesus says that he is the sheep gate and he is the good shepherd, which I think means that his *way*, that is, losing the self and dying for the sake of love, is the gate. The good shepherd enters through that gate and those whose desire it is to steal or kill or destroy, as we do when we are feeding our ambition, reputation or greed, sneak in some other way so that what they do will not be able to be seen. The gate of the sheepfold, losing the self, leads to pasture and to fullness of life, not to the habits of death and destruction to which the world is conditioned.

The good shepherd is the one who goes before the sheep and who leads the sheep in order to protect them from harm. But is the harm from which the Good Shepherd protects us the harm to our physical bodies? A long time ago I read that the gate through which the Good Shepherd leads the sheep is the gate that leads to their slaughter. I don't know if that is true. What is true is the uncomfortable and inescapable paradox that to follow Jesus anywhere can be hazardous! Going through the gate one hopes to enjoy abundant life here for a long time and not perish quite so quickly as Jesus did.

I am wondering: to leave behind the violence that the world considers acceptable, not just the violence of aggression, but also violence in the name of self defense and reasonable retribution, it seems one could only walk through that gate if it has already been discovered that being through with killing for *any* reason *is* abundant life. The reason this is so of course is that one has died to the self that requires possessions, admiration and protection. Therefore one is living in the freedom of no one to protect and defend. No one has need to do violence to anyone, whether with words or actions. The thieves and bandits who accept violence and greed are in fact quite sympathetic and understandable characters from the world's point of view. We identify easily with them. We mostly consider them pragmatic and sensible people. When they kill our enemies, we will likely call them heroes. This is the way the world works and we try to make a comfortable place for ourselves in it without having to participate too directly in its seamy underbelly.

Leaving aside the challenge of living without doing violence to persons who want to physically hurt us, we also want to win the moral arguments. It is a challenge not to lose affection, regard and care for another no matter who is right and who is wrong. It can be desperately frustrating to concede the battle to one whom we deem to be misguided, uncharitable or just plain wrong. Not even Jesus won that victory. Winning and losing is the world's game, it is not for Christians.

Recently, Western Oregon played Central Washington for the regional conference

championship in softball. Sarah Tucholsky, a senior on the Oregon team was a line drive kind of hitter. However, this day, for the first time in her life, she hit a homerun. Two of her teammates ran home. After she had rounded first base, she realized that she had not actually tagged the base. She turned around, and when she did, she tore her ACL. I can't tell you what that is, except that it meant she could not run. She could not walk. She barely crawled back to first base, she was in such pain. Her coach asked if someone else on the team could step in to run for her. The umpire sadly declared that no one from her team could touch her, else she would be automatically out and her homerun declared a two run single. It was then that Mallory Holtman and Liz Wallace from Central Washington, the opposing team, asked the umpire if they could carry Sarah around the bases. The umpire said yes. If the opposing team assisted her, the homerun would count. So the two of them lifted her up and let her foot touch each remaining base. As it turned out, Sarah's team won the championship. There were probably only about 100 people in the stands for this game. Many of them wept as she was carried from base to base by the opposing team. As if to remind us that we do indeed have voice recognition for the Good Shepherd, more than 100,000 people have tuned in to see the U-tube video of these women who did what a Good Shepherd does. Deep down we know that the only thing we may rejoice to win is the loss of the self. All else is rubbish. And when we see it happen as they did on that softball field, it heals our hearts we did not know were broken.

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