

Following the Good Shepherd

Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Rev. Dr. J. Stewart Hardy

Sunday, May 3, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23;
1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Back home in New Zealand there's a church I love. It is a small stone gothic church with a slate roof. Its pews will accommodate 85 people, and there is regular worship there once a month. It is a world famous place for weddings.

There are no stained glass windows, they are completely unnecessary, for immediately behind the altar is a large plate glass window, with plate glass panels at each side. The view through those windows is spectacular; it's a panorama of Lake Tekapo and the majestic hills and mountains to the north, and it's not far from the tallest mountain in New Zealand, Mount Cook.

The church was built in 1933, and its name is the Church of the Good Shepherd. The owners and the people of the high country sheep stations around the lake where the church is found donated the land and the funds to have it built. Outside the church by the main door, just to the left, is a large stone on which is mounted a life-sized bronze statue of a collie dog. The plaque on the stone reads: "This monument was erected by the runholders of the Mackenzie County and those who also appreciate the value of the collie dog, without the help of which, the grazing of this mountain county would be impossible." The name of the church and its monument say all that needs to be said; these people, shepherds in their own right, know the Good Shepherd.

Before they were able to have their church, they had to rely on an occasional visit from a minister to their remote and vast sheep stations. When they were at last able to build their church and they were at last able to come together to worship, they knew their Shepherd, and so they named their church.

Jesus and the people of His time were only too familiar with shepherds and sheep. During the day the sheep were led to grazing pasture by their shepherd; during the night they were gathered together in a sheepfold, along with sheep from other flocks, in a stone fenced enclosure with only one entrance. It was common for shepherds to take their turn sleeping in the entranceway in order to protect the sheep that they might rest and be refreshed for the next day, and safe from the predators that roamed at night. The shepherds lived with their sheep, night and day, so that they knew their sheep individually. So it is to this very day.

In the morning each shepherd can call his own flock from the mix in the enclosure, and each sheep knows exactly which shepherd is its. In fact, it has been recorded that these shepherds can actually call individual sheep out of the flock, and the sheep will come directly to their side.

A tourist in the Holy Land, Marion Henderson, tells the story of riding in a tour bus from Jerusalem to Jericho. Since she was leading the group, she was sitting in the front seat and, having led many groups on the same trip, was almost half-asleep. Suddenly the bus lurched to a stop, waking her up. There in the middle of the road, stood a shepherd.

Now with a 48-passenger bus running down the road towards them, most people wouldn't be out there. But the shepherd was. And when the bus stopped, the sheep began to cross the road. Not all at once, but leisurely in twos and threes and singly, as sheep are wont to do. But the shepherd never shooed them, never hurried them, he just stood his ground until the last sheep was safely off the road. Then he followed them, and threaded his way through the flock until he was back in front, leading them again.

Just so, Jesus tells us that He is our Good Shepherd, and we – each and every one of us – are members of His flock. This morning, we added two lambs, if you will, to our flock. Pastor Easton baptized Kamryn Nicole Taylor, and I've just baptized Kylee Elizabeth Mack. Kamryn Nicole and Kylee Elizabeth – the names given to them in their baptism – are the names by which the Good Shepherd will always know them, and they are the names and the individuals He will never abandon, nor will He ever forget.

Each service we have here is part of a larger flock, many smaller flocks meeting at different times in worship, known as Trinity; which in itself is part of a larger flock known as a synod; which is again part of an even larger flock a national church; which itself again is only one expression of a number of expressions of faith that bring together a vast flock, parts of which are to be found in every part of the world. Everywhere there are “other sheep” just as Jesus said, but today, today in this flock, we celebrate the arrival of Kamryn Nicole and Kylee Elizabeth. We will surround them with our love and care and prayerful support, sharing with them the story of the One who is our Lord, the Good Shepherd. He is the One who laid down His life for all of us. He is the gift of God's love for us that we might not perish but have life now and hereafter, a gift for each of us – every single one. You see, we are not asked to become outstanding sheep, or vigorous sheep, or perfectly obedient sheep, in order to become part of the flock, for God loves each of us, each and every one of us, just the way we are, without any conditions attached. All that is asked of us is that we follow Him. But there's a snag.

There are others around acting like shepherds but who in truth are nothing more than hirelings. We are surrounded by them with their noise and their advertising and all the rest of it, all claiming to be shepherds who will lead us to safety and security – so they say. There is always what appears to be greener grass, more lush forage, tempting places to wander, better places to be, more important things to do. Sheep of every time and age have wandered off from the shepherd, some to be retrieved, and others to perish.

In my teenage years I did my share of shepherding. Once in the beginning years of that task, I helped move a flock of sheep from an island where they had been grazing for some months back to the mainland. The sheep had to come out of their pasture, cross the wharf, and walk over a plank carriageway to an open boat. Most of the sheep followed the direction of the shepherds, but some knew a better way and leapt into the sea and drowned.

It was the first time I had helped with such a journey, and I was distraught at my failure to shepherd the sheep safely. The farmer who owned the sheep put his hand on my shoulder and said to me, "It's okay. This happens not only when we bring the sheep back, but also when we bring the sheep to the island to graze in the first place. You see, the problem is, they think they know better than the shepherd."

And that's the way it is, beloved. God does love us so much that, if we choose, He lets us go where we will, even if it's away from Him and the leading of our Good Shepherd. You see, our coming to worship here this morning is something like sheep gathering in the sheepfold in Jesus' time. We are set free into the world each week, and we return here to rest a while in His presence, to listen to His Word and to hear His voice, to welcome and support the newly baptized, to be forgiven with bread and wine, and to be equipped to go once more into the world. We are the fellowship of those who have been gathered together by our Lord, the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ.

Of course, something is expected from the flock. From the sheep, wool and meat is expected. And from us, we are expected to be instruments of God's grace and channels of His love to all we meet. We may be the only Christ's that a person ever encounters in his life.

Such service, in its most dramatic form, is seen when members of our armed services make the ultimate sacrifice, when firefighters and police officers perish in the line of duty, and when a school nurse dies immediately after resuscitating high school coach. Though much more frequently, and perhaps more importantly, we see such service in its simplest and most common form – caring for the sick, the poor, the bereaved, and those in need.

In the end, I think it goes something like this. There is a legend connected with the famous "Praying Hands" drawn by Albrecht Durer – are you familiar with them, they are often reproduced in plaster, and ornaments, and greeting cards? The story begins with two young struggling artists, one a musician. His ambition was to play and compose melodies which would reflect the beauty of God. The other was Durer, the German painter and engraver, one of the most influential artists of the early 1500's. The two young men lived together to share expenses, but they still had a hard time making ends meet. Eventually, their situation became critical, and the musician, perhaps sensing that his friend had the greater talent, began to work in the fields in order to support the two of them. He continued that work for a number of years, until his friend Durer finally succeeded in gaining a reputation and a certain amount of financial stability. By then, however, the musician's sensitive hands were too brittle and hardened to return to music. According to legend, it was those hands which Durer decided to immortalize in his painting familiar to us all, the praying hands.

You see, sacrificial service for another in need does not always mean the death of the body. Often, as in this case, it is the sacrificing of one's own goals and desires in deference to promoting those of another. To do so is to bear the marks of the sheep who pass through life following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. When the time comes, may it be said of us, that was the way we walked through life.

Amen.

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