

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Easter  
April 25, 2021 Year B  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath  
Gospel: John 10:11-18

Of all the metaphors that Jesus employs, the one of sheep and shepherds is probably the most dearly loved. There is a sense of the pastoral, warm and fuzzy about it.

Listening to Jesus smoothly talking about himself as the Shepherd and us as his sheep, there is a deep feeling of comfort, that all is right with the world. And if this is really so, then what does it mean to be sheep?

To be a sheep is, at its most basic, to be a creature. They likely do not worry about the cares of the greater world, and their worries about the socio-political aspects of life are non-existent. They don't aspire to become CEOs, Olympic gold medalists or bishops of the Episcopal Church. I'm a big fan of James Herriot's book "All Creatures Great and Small" and the 1980s series is still the best in the dramatization of that book. If you have ever watched it, you will have seen more sheep than you might ever care to. And if you have ever watched it, you will have noticed that the sheep in every scene are doing the same things – eating or sleeping. Oh sure, there were scenes in which they were lambing or were terrorized by local wolves, but for the most part they were eating or sleeping. Sheep, it seems, are just so happy to be sheep: eating and walking and playing and sleeping and bleating their way through life. A sheep is a creature, created, loved and nurtured by their Creator.

Being a sheep also means being a part of a community, a flock. Sheep are safest and happiest as part of a larger community. They were not meant to be solitary. When one does wander off, it knows it is alone, scared, and in a precarious position. It knows that – out on the hillside all by itself – it will be an easy and quick dinner for that wolf or other roaming predator. Sometimes, a sheep gets lost, it's true. But most sheep know to stick together, that their body depends on other bodies forming into one large protective ball of wool. When they do get lost, they listen. They listen for the bleating of other sheep or the sound of the Shepherd's voice.

Finally, I conclude with one last thing about being a sheep: Sheep are followers. Now, this is where it may get a bit trickier for us to really imagine ourselves being sheep. It's an image we don't particularly like to be associated with, because we are brought up in a world in which we are urged to be leaders, not followers. Being a follower would require too much humility. It would require saying to ourselves that we just don't always have all the answers, that, we too, can lose our way.

Sheep are followers because they have no idea where they are going. They need to be led to the areas of new and more luscious grass. They need to be led away from areas that may expose them to predators. They follow because they recognize the voice of shepherd calling their name. Sheep need someone who knows their needs and can tend to them; someone to

ward off scary wolves and defend them in the face of danger; someone who will memorize their markings, knowing their distinctive identities; someone who will help bring new lambs into the world; someone who will tend to the health of the flock; someone who is trustworthy and someone who knows the lay of the land, the places of danger and the places of respite. Their ability to follow is ultimately life-giving. Not just subsistence, but abundant life.

And that is what Jesus is reminding us of today. He doesn't simply call us sheep because we have no sense of agency. He calls us sheep because he wants us to have an abundant life. But so often we get in our own way and stray off. So often we think we can go at things alone, that we need only rely on our own internal GPS to find happiness and fulfillment in determining our lives. But the reality is that our lives are not our own. As much as we are asked to believe that we are self-sufficient, and self-regulating, the truth is that we are not meant to be alone, we are made for community, for relationships that hold a mirror up to who we are and to what we can become when we are concerned for one another.

I've been thinking about Eric Chauvin after the verdict that was passed down on him for the murder of George Floyd. Officer Chauvin's actions were of a type that didn't express concern of Mr. Floyd, and which eventually lead to his death. So what are we to do with that? As much as I agree with the jury's verdict and expect that a jail sentence will be handed down to Officer Chauvin, a part of me also understands something very profound if not heartbreaking about Officer Chauvin. I know that just as much as Jesus is calling to his sheep in Mr. Floyd's community, to Mr. Floyd's family and to the hundreds of thousands of African Americans for whom police brutality has been a frightening mainstay of their lives, I also know that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is calling Officer Chauvin back into his flock. So how do we reconcile ourselves with that? Because the reality is that any lessons learned, any progress to be made, any reconciliation to be achieved will have to involve not just the Mr. Floyd's of this world, but also the Officer Chauvins of this world. We are of the same flock and no matter how far astray we go; Jesus still calls us back to face one another.

I can never hear the Good Shepherd readings without thinking of Jesus's parable of the lost sheep. Remember that one from Luke?

"Then Jesus told them this parable: 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent'" (Luke 15:3-7).

Jesus views any person apart from Him as lost. How are they lost? Their sins alienate them from the holy God, leaving them groping aimlessly in darkness. The shepherd in the story, however, didn't despise his straying sheep. With a heart of compassion, Jesus also values each sinner, no matter how deep the sin.

Jesus is intent upon rescuing the sinner not only because God gave them to Him but also because He loves them, as evidenced by the fact that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is also the Sacrificial Lamb, hung on the cross so that we may be forever reconciled to God. It's easy to feel the comfort that the Good Shepherd Passage gives us when all we sometimes have to contend with are speeding tickets, or annoying neighbors, or any of the other annoyances life brings our way and to which we respond with indignation, or righteous anger. Imagine what the Good Shepherd Passage might sound like to someone who has killed another, wounded another, hurt another so deeply that all they want to do is run away from God's light into the darkness of the forest, hoping to never have to face the ever-forgiving Shepherd. It may just sound like love they thought they would never again receive or it may sound like love they never had.

None of Jesus's sheep are beyond saving, none of us are unworthy of God's forgiveness and love. We all have a place in that flock. Some of us may not believe that, but Jesus is crystal clear about it. "I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Amen.