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“A Sense of Belonging”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

April 26, 2015

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

This Sunday, if you did not already realize it, is Good Shepherd Sunday. It is so called because during the Easter season, the church designates this particular Sunday around chapter 10 of John’s gospel. The chapter focuses on the image that Jesus uses to describe himself as good shepherd. I would encourage you, during the course of this season, to take some time and read the entire chapter because each year, different selections are taken from our reading, and it would be helpful to see the whole context in and of itself.

Just last week, when Homer Ashby led the Men of Faith on a retreat, he used the verse just above the one that began today’s reading that is probably the most famous in the whole chapter 10 when Jesus was describing his role as shepherd and affirms “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

This Easter season, we gather around this core mystery of our faith. All three readings that we just heard—from Acts, 1 John, and John—concern themselves with that mystery. It is an attempt on our part on hearing that word to interpret, to proclaim, to name, to appropriate and to deepen its meaning. We are called to grapple with the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is the Easter mystery.

Every time I go on the New Hope Presbytery website, front and center is a statement of our mission: *In response to God's call in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ...* It is precisely that core value of the Easter mystery during this Easter season that I encourage you to meditate upon during these weeks before Pentecost: the significance and the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

So often, our emphasis is on the death. You say to yourselves, “Why not?” This afternoon, we conclude the anniversary celebration of the end of the Civil War at Bennett Place here in Durham, and I have always wondered how it was possible that the citizens of our nation, despite their deep differences, could fight each other with such fury and hatred for four years. As Marilyn mentioned in her sermons, there is the Armenian genocide, the anniversary of the battle of Gallipoli in Turkey, the Jewish Holocaust, the wars and ISIS, police brutality on the streets of Baltimore. Even though there is that dying, the message on this Good Shepherd Sunday is focused on resurrection.

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and John were detained because they annoyed the priests and the Sadducees with their preaching of Jesus. (I love that word—annoyed.) So they were taken into custody, put into jail, brought before the rulers, the elders, and the scribes, and they challenged them: “By what power do you do what do you?” Peter is so different in the Acts of the Apostles than he was in all the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As David mentioned in his opening words about the Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd,” in response to Peter’s boldness, he had only one interest in his mind, one thing only, and that was that this Jesus, crucified by you and raised from the dead, has made a radical difference in human life and has become the one true channel, the door, the gate of salvation. Peter is a completely different man in the Acts of the Apostles. With confidence and boldness, he proclaimed that this Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, has given us a whole new perspective in the living of human life.

In the beautiful letter of 1 John, John speaks about the impact of the death and

resurrection of Jesus on our relationship with God. We have become little children. Already, as little children, the impact of the death and resurrection has made a huge difference in the way in which we conduct our lives. It's not by word or speech that's cheap, but it's in truth and action, and it's precisely there that we are reassured before God. "Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, and we receive from him whatever we ask... by the Spirit that he has given us" (1 John 3:22, 24).

In a real way, both of those readings sum up and embrace the concept of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It's a wonderful image. They give us a story of courage and reconciliation and a message of love and consolation. We take it for granted; it becomes overly pious in the way in which we speak of Jesus and how he is depicted with the lamb on his shoulders. But in this particular text from John 10, Jesus begins with "I am the good shepherd," and then he goes on to explain that his shepherding is very different from that of a hired hand. His shepherding is all about caring for the flock. He is willing to protect the flock in safety. He is willing to feed and nourish the flock. He is willing to give the flock a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction, the one shepherd and the one flock. The Good Shepherd cares profoundly and deeply, and this care is evidenced in the second paragraph where it begins in the same way: "I am the good shepherd," and he uses the image in this way as "I have laid down my life for my sheep." He is a compassionate shepherd. The root meaning of compassion is to bear with, to suffer with. He is willing to accept the risks in caring for that flock. He shares those risks; he shares the hardships, the demands, the diagnoses that we receive on the journey of our lives, our violated relationships, our fears, our anxieties. This Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is willing to bear that burden and accept the responsibility for our fate. Jesus is not only our savior, but the one who walks with us, before us, beside us as a Good Shepherd.

So what does this mean for us? What does this mean for our lives? First of all, it speaks to good leadership, and I would like to extend a word of gratitude to Marilyn Hedgpeth, Head of Staff. This is not the first time in which she shepherded this flock as our head. This is the second time. I am grateful to her

for the way in which she has led us with generosity. She has encouraged, empowered, and called forth from us the best in shepherding this flock during this transition period. Thank you, Marilyn!

Secondly, I would like to speak to you who are parents of children. Just this past week, I was recommended to read in the *New York Times* a piece by David Brooks, who talks about child-rearing called “Love and Merit.” He says, “There are two great defining features of child-rearing today. First, children are now praised to an unprecedented degree. As Dorothy Parker once joked, American children aren’t raised; they are incited. They are given food, shelter and applause.” (Brooks, David. “Love and Merit.” *New York Times* 24 Apr. 2015, New York ed.: A27. Print.)

The message he gives to parents shepherding children is that too often, parents cross the fine line between unconditional love (that we say is at the heart of being a parent) and conditional love because if they don’t meet up to our expectations, our sense of success, we communicate a message of their letting us down and stifling their growth. (It might be good for us as parents to gather, either in faith in community or other avenues, to discuss his message of conditional and unconditional love in the way in which we parent.) You as parents are challenged by this all the time as good shepherds in the way in which you love and support and give roots to your children, yet give them the freedom to fly off with wings. Remember the movie *Rio*!

Finally, I know that we’re in the midst of nominations for deacons and ruling elders, and one of the insights that I had was this: too often, the members of the nominating committee have to call you and invite you to give this consideration. I suggest that if you’re at all interested in becoming a deacon or a ruling elder, that you meet with someone you trust and test whether or not this is the direction in which you should be moving as a baptized member of the congregation. Consider the fact that all of us have been called by virtue of our baptisms to ministry. I won’t repeat the letter I wrote in the newsletter, but I hope that you understand that ministry is not simply a matter of being on a

church staff or chair of an important committee, but it involves very quiet, but effective ways in which we explore simple, but direct ways of caring for one another and making ourselves available to exercise our baptismal gifts.

So take to heart this challenge of Jesus, as our Good Shepherd, to be good shepherds ourselves so that we might accept the challenge of John 10 and know that because Jesus is our Good Shepherd, we have been given the opportunity to have life and to share that life with one another *abundantly*. Good Shepherd Sunday should be for all of us a time to examine our consciences on how well we have contributed to the care and feeding of the flock of Christ in this part of God's Kingdom.

Reference and Influences:

David Brooks
Monika Hellwig
Robert Duggan
Dan Kimberg