

**Together We Can**  
Rev. Robert Griffin  
Sunshine Cathedral  
Sunday, May 3, 2009

John 10.14-18

*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as [Abba God] knows me and I know [God]. And 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. For this reason [Abba God] loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again...*"

Our gospel reading today is about Jesus being the Good Shepherd. A shepherd is one who takes care of sheep, usually in flocks in the fields. A quick glance of the commentaries suggests that references to sheep in the bible occur over 500 times. A shepherd tends the sheep, guides and guards the sheep, provides food and protection and care for the sheep. Shepherding is one of the oldest professions, beginning some 10,000 years ago in Asia Minor. That sheep were domesticated early in Palestine is suggested by the Cain-Abel story in Genesis. Sheep represented the chief wealth and the total livelihood of pastoral peoples.

It's important to recognize that in the Bible the nature of sheep is presented as affectionate, non-aggressive, relatively defenseless, and in constant need of care and supervision. The sheep and their shepherd are bound in a relationship that, when expressed in theological language, is very powerful and very moving. Most are very familiar with the 23rd Psalm as an example, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Or as one child telling the teacher, "I know the entire 23rd Psalm," the teacher said, ok, recite it for me and the child said, "The Lord is my Shepherd, that's all I want, the end."

In Isaiah, God is spoken of as a female shepherd: "...God will gather the lambs in her arms, and will carry them in her bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." The New Testament focuses on Jesus, as the Good Shepherd.

Our gospel reading today from John is metaphorical. We are given the image of Jesus and Jesus being proclaimed the Good Shepherd --- now I'm pretty sure we've seen images of Jesus with sheep in various positions. Maybe you've seen the one with Jesus standing, staff in hand with a lamb across his shoulders --- it is a beautiful image, a calming site, maybe even a pleasant and safe image and at the same time, this particular image can be troublesome.

Why is the image of Jesus standing; staff in hand with a lamb across his shoulders troublesome? This is the story behind the story - it involves shepherds and how they discipline wayward sheep. According to a shepherd's story, if a lamb has a tendency to wander off or run away, the shepherd will actually break one of its legs. The shepherd will then tend to the broken leg - put a splint on it and bind it up. Then for several days or weeks while the leg is mending, he will actually carry the lamb, much like Jesus with the lamb on his shoulder. Now if the anecdote is

correct, once the sheep's leg has healed, it will follow the shepherd, close at his or her side the rest of its life. It will never again go astray. Now to us, breaking the sheep's leg might sound a bit harsh, yet the shepherd, who has invested money into a herd realizes that it is better for the sheep to suffer temporary pain than to wander off into the wilderness and become supper for some wild animal.

Now I do not believe that God, Jesus, a Higher Power or any other name that we might use for the Divine waits for us to "stray", then punishes us harshly just so we will stay close. Our worship must be a matter of free choice, or it isn't really worship. Worship that is coerced, that we offer simply to avoid God's wrath or to gain God's favor isn't real worship, it's a bargaining chip. God must be better than that, and our worship must be more real than that.

I don't believe a deity places situations in my life just to see if I will pass a test or not. I don't believe that I have to pass a test to keep God close, or to keep God from breaking my legs (or spirit) to keep me close. If we understand God as punishing, setting us up for failure, waiting to catch us making a mistake, and willing to torment us to force us into compliance, then our image of God is an abusive one and we would do well to reexamine our beliefs and choose kinder beliefs that better serve and nurture us.

It is also important to point that there were also women who played very important roles like that of shepherding. We have, of course, Mary, Jesus' mother, and Elizabeth; the many women who minister to Jesus; the women at his crucifixion; the women who visit the tomb; we have Tabitha, Priscilla and Lydia and many others who also took on shepherding roles. Roles of nurturing, protecting, helping...not hurting or threatening.

To understand what John's Jesus is trying to get at in today's story, we have to understand the context. To whom was Jesus speaking when he called himself the Good Shepherd?

First, Jesus was not talking to his followers; he was speaking to the Pharisees. They were accusing Jesus of being a law breaker because in a few verses before our gospel reading today Jesus had healed a blind man on the Sabbath by making mud, placing it on the man eyes and then instructing him to go wash in the pool Siloam. Now, the Pharisees didn't care that a man's sight had been restored; they were more concerned that someone had broken the Sabbath law by working to make mud to help restore an individual's sight. They understood God as caring about rules more than people; Jesus cared about people more than rules. Love trumped Law for Jesus, and the legalists held that against him.

And we've heard our senior pastor tell us before that in John's gospel, the Jesus who says "I AM" represents the faithful community. When "our" Jesus says, "I AM," we are able to also affirm, "I AM." So when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." the Pharisees would remember the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, where God is our shepherd. Jesus, trusting his intimacy with the divine, can affirm that he has divine qualities...he has gifts to share. He can be the hands of God touching others, the love of God in action. As followers of Jesus, we too can say that WE have divine qualities...we have gifts to share. We can be the hands of God touching others, the love of God in action in our world. The legalists won't like that...that empowers the individual, rather than the institution that gives them their privilege and authority. But if we are children of God, and we

are, then we can affirm our divine qualities and then we are able to Share the Light with the world!

Not only was Jesus affirming divine qualities for himself (and all children of God), he was also contrasting himself to the legalism demonstrated by the Pharisees. It's not the Pharisees were bad people, but they had forgotten that the spirit of the law gives life, not the letter of it. They had forgotten that mercy and justice and hope and kindness and compassion are evidence of the spirit, not how rigidly one follows the rules.

The shepherd image comes up again after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus and his apostles had just finished a breakfast of fish and bread on the shore of Lake Tiberius, when Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord. You know I love you." Then Jesus said, "Feed my lambs!" A second time, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" And a second time Peter answered, "Yes, Lord. You knoooooow that I love you!" And Jesus said, "Look after my sheep. Tend my sheep." Then a third time, Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. By this time, Peter was getting really miffed. Let's face it, he was hurt that Jesus asked him the same question three times. But the gospels report he merely said, "Lord, you know everything. You know I love you." Then Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

Not the leg breaking shepherd, but the shepherd who feeds, who nurtures, who nourishes, who protects...that is the kind of Shepherd Jesus is...the kind of shepherd we are to be.

Like Jesus we are called to lead – we are called to be agents of change for those who are without voices. We are called to lead in the area of global poverty; we are called to lead in taking greater care of our environment; we are called to be leaders in the area of LGBT justice issues or on any issue where discrimination thrives; we are called to continue to lead in the area of HIV/AIDS education and prevention; if our vision for a better community and a better world is a holy vision, and I believe it is, then we can't afford to sit back and wait for someone else to do it. We are called. We have the divine qualities. We are shepherds following the way of the Shepherding Christ...it is our job to speak up and act out for healing and hope and justice for all people.

And if you don't see yourself as a leader, then let me affirm you as a follower. A follower who supports the mission and goals of making this world a better place for everyone, including ourselves – when we work to improve ourselves, let the work you do be a reflection of the Divine within you organizing and reorganizing to make you a better person.

Most were not born with a silver spoon in their mouth or hand and even if they were in this economy, I'm sure the spoon might be a little tarnished by now. We all have some advantages, and we all have challenges. But we have found that believing in ourselves and working hard can help us accomplish great things and survive even the toughest of times. We may stumble now and again, but we can also get back up because the sacred voice within us, the Good Shepherd of our own being says, "Don't give up! I'm here to nurture you, nourish you, encourage you, and help you get back on your feet."

So let me ask two simple questions:

Do you love God, if so; then love your neighbor also.

Do you believe in your self-worth; then believe you can make a difference in your community.

Together we can change and make the world a better place.

That's the way it is with us who follow the teachings of Jesus. We are all called to shepherds. If one of us falls, the rest are here to pick him or her up and we continue together in the way of hope and healing. We are the good shepherds. Let it be so.