

SPG#203, Easter 4B

May 3, 2009

Acts 4:5-12

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

For those of us who live more or less near the scripture, in the New Testament, we are accustomed to hearing references to the titles of Jesus. At various points he is called “Son of God.” And that is a rather forthright title. But there are other titles that are less “out there” and forthright. These titles indicate something about Jesus, but also something about those who relate to Jesus. For example, he is referred to as the Lamb of God. A lamb, particularly in Judaism, refers to sacrifice. Most often it was a sacrifice to God. A lamb, particularly in Judaism, refers to sacrifice. Most often it was a sacrifice to God. But in the New Testament Jesus is sacrificed for some one or ones, us. So, in Lamb of God, along with the idea of his sacrifice is the idea that it was for us, and that we are indebted to him. He is referred to as the Messiah. A Messiah is someone who saves others. So the title refers to his saving work. But it also refers to us who are saved. He is referred to as the Lord. That refers to his special status. But it also refers to us because he is our Lord. So many of his titles are not just about him, but about us as well. And for all of us, at different times, that may be a hard pill to swallow. Because in each title that indicates his special status, what is indicated along with that is our own vulnerability, our own needs, our own humanity. And at first blush, that seems an affront to our self-esteem. And perhaps we are more ready to accept his special status than we are our own vulnerability.

This all leaves me somewhat suspicious. For in the past decade I have come to know the gospel writers as fairly provocative and fairly sneaky. And in their words, often they are trying to get the reader to know something, to realize something. So, in the titles of Jesus, I am sure they are saying something about the status of Jesus. But I wrestle with the idea that they are saying something about me.

Today is no exception. For we are invited to consider Jesus as the Good Shepherd. When I read this passage a few weeks ago after having not read it for some time, I was not aware of any such mechanisms or provocations. And the words seemed to be about Jesus claiming his status as Good Shepherd, as one who loves us his people, his sheep.

The words seem to be about Jesus' radical love for us. It is about him laying his life down for us. So it seems to be about Jesus' sacrificial love.

As I look back at that reading of today's gospel I can say that my response to the reading was very interesting. And my thinking went something like this, "The reading is about Jesus loving me. And it really is not just about Jesus' loving me. It is about Jesus loving me intensely to the point of sacrifice of his own life."

And I felt warmed as I have felt warmed at other times when I heard or read that. But I also thought, 'You know, I have heard that before. I have read that before.' And so I figured again that it was OK that Jesus laid down his life for me. And it was OK that he loved me so much.

And for good measure I read the passage again. And I saw where Jesus contrasts himself with a hireling, or with someone employed to watch sheep, but who does not really care for the sheep. And Jesus claims to be the one who really cares about me, about us. He claims to be the Good Shepherd. And so, after those readings, I put the passage down and lived with it for a few days. And I was aware that something was bugging me about it. I was aware of feeling restless about it somehow. But I could not put my finger on it.

Finally I realized what it was. I realized that I did not like being cast in the role of a sheep. And I was not sure that I liked the idea of someone being my shepherd. And I thought to myself, 'I am almost 62 years old. I am part of a solid marriage. We have raised 3 wonderful children. My time as a priest in the church and a counselor in mental health has gone well. So, I do not really like the idea of thinking of myself as a sheep.

The idea of me being a sheep with a shepherd seemed to be an affront to my self esteem. But then I thought that some day I will not be a "can do" person. Some day, if I live into advanced years, someone will be in charge of helping me move from place to place. Someone may be in charge of making my financial decisions.

I guess I could say that real life is lived when you are most functional. But I have met many fervent and wonderful people in their 70's, 80's, 90's, and some older than that.

And so the inescapable conclusion for me is that vulnerability is part of life. Weakness is part of life. Part of life is being assertive, active, and physically productive. But part of life is letting someone else care for you. Part of life is being dependent.

For a person who is accepting of human vulnerabilities, Jesus' offer to be our Good Shepherd is good news.

The scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are filled with references to people as sheep and God who cares for them, the shepherd.

From the 23rd Psalm: **The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.**

From Jeremiah 23: **He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.**

From the closing benediction of the book of Hebrews, which we will hear in the closing blessing today, **Our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep.**

In Mark 6 Jesus **saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.**

There really are two major points in Jesus' words as the Good Shepherd. The first is the radical love that God has for us. Remember the contrast between someone who is employed to watch the sheep, and one who actually cares for the sheep. In the words from John today the writer goes to great lengths to underscore the fact that God loves and cares for us radically. The other point is about us and how willing and able we are to be cared for. I have seen such tenderness and vulnerability in some families. And I have seen it in some churches. I have seen strong and powerful people able to be sheep-like as they are cared for.

To celebrate one's vulnerability does not mean that you do not celebrate your strength.

To be vulnerable and to be strong means you have a wide and deep repertoire.

It is true that we are called into service in the scripture. Each of us in our life is called into a life and sent into service. The parameters of that life and that service have to do with who you are and your particular and unique gifts. And there are many challenges to be active in that service. And there are many encouragements in the Christian life toward approaching that service with the utmost seriousness and integrity.

But also in the scripture, via the Good Shepherd, we are called to realization and to truth. And the truth is that the knowledge that you need in your life will not always come from yourself. The truth is that when you need strength, there will be times when you will not be the one who is strong. There are times, and there will be times when what you need comes from another.

It is important to know about vulnerability and weakness. For in knowing that we give ourselves a break from having to always measure up, always perform, always be striving. We will know something about being cared for by another. We will know something about being still and knowing God. We will know something about our needing the Good Shepherd. For if we do know how to be a sheep, then we will look for him in our lives, the one who calls us to life and service, and the one who carries us as lambs in his bosom. The Good Shepherd - Amen.