

“A Church of Wonders and Signs”

Easter 4

Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 4, May 7, 2017 dedicated to our 2016-2017 Christian Education Staff, teachers, assistants, and students, to Amanda Hoyt and Rev. Dan Clark and the awesome work of Faith in Public Life in Ohio and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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A Shepherd, sheep, love, justice, awe and wonder fill our texts from John and Acts today.

John 10:1 opens the Gospel’s chapter on Jesus as our Good Shepherd. It is an image that we love for our Lord. He guides his flock. He knows his sheep by name. He leads them from troubled waters to the still waters. He makes life safe for them by comforting them and allowing them to “lie down in green pastures.” Ultimately, The Good Shepherd is one who lays

down his life for the sheep. While all these make great preaching images, the flip side is that most of us think of sheep as slobbering, untidy, dumb animals that exist only to be sheered and slaughtered.

Not long ago, I read something from someone who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. He claims that **cattle ranchers** are largely responsible for spreading the rumors that sheep are dumb. He claims that you stand behind cattle and make loud noises to get them running in front of you. But if you stand behind sheep and make loud noises, all they do is run around behind you because they prefer to be led. So, he says, you push cows and you lead sheep. Sheep will not go anywhere if someone does not go first. They really need a shepherd who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right (Barbara Brown Taylor, The Preaching Life, Cowley Publications, Boston, MA, 1993, pp. 140-141).

He says sheep grow fond of their shepherd. He says once they came to know him, it never ceased to amaze him that he could walk through his sleeping flock without disturbing one of them, while a stranger could not step one foot into the flock without causing total panic. Sheep see their shepherd as part of the family. Their relationship is special and they develop a language among them that is their own. A good shepherd

learns to distinguish between bleats of pain and pleasure, while the sheep learn his cluck of the tongue, which means food or a two-note song that means it is time to go home. (Ibid, p. 141)

In his little book, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller tells stories of his days as a shepherd that match the stories of our Midwestern shepherd. Keller says that a Good Shepherd plants and tends green pastures, invests in the medical care of his flock, makes them feel safe enough that they are able to lie down to sleep. He also tells stories of sheep who lead others in the flock away from the safety and protection of the shepherd and the other sheep. One such sheep that Keller calls “Mrs. Gadabout” was beautiful and perfect in her looks. But she was always restless with him as a shepherd. She would do anything she could to lead others away from the flock - seeking breaks in the fence to crawl through and even waiting for low tide to walk around the seaside fence line. The fields she led them to were close to cliffs and filled with unhealthy and scant fields of food. He spent much of his time pursuing.

Mrs. Gad-about. When her lambs were born, she taught them her same fence crawling and runaway approach to life. With Mrs. Gad-about it was an ingrained habit. She was simply not content with the things as they were. In time, as she continued to lead his flock into danger through her obstinate,

discontented ways, he struggled with what to do. He loved her like the others. She was strong and beautiful and alert. But, in the end, she was not good for the flock or safe for them. Finally, Phillip had to take her life for the good of the flock. Once she was gone, there was peace once again in the flock (Keller, from Psalm 23, chapter 2, "I Shall Not Want," pp. 32-34).

A good shepherd knows how to manage the flock. In Palestine and Israel, you can see Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures in the mountains. In fact, there are shepherds and sheep still on in the "shepherd fields" made so famous in Luke's telling of the Christmas story and Jesus' birth. It is wild to see eight or nine small flocks gather at a watering hole to form a huge convention of thirsty sheep only to hear their shepherd make a call and watch the distinctive flock recollect themselves and head home. They know their shepherd's voice. They know his call. They will follow only his voice.

Jesus was always concerned about his "flock" – about each and every follower. While there were those who wished to call him "Messiah," which for them meant warrior, king, and political leader, Jesus wanted them to see him as a Good

Shepherd. As with David before him, he wanted them to understand he was different. He wanted people to belong to his flock, to listen to his voice (and not the “gadabouts” of his time), to follow him, to trust that he would care for them and keep them safe. He wanted them to know that if they stayed with the flock, if they didn’t wander off and seek other fields, they would know the “abundance and fullness of life.” He also demonstrated by his death on the cross that he would lay down his life for his flock - which is the ultimate sacrifice of love which the Good Shepherd gives to his flock. He gave it all for those whom he loved and cared for. **He was the ultimate Good Shepherd.**

The sacrificial love of the Good Shepherd was not lost on the “flock” we call the First Christians. They were an adventurous and exciting church – poised and directed healthfully by the Holy Spirit. The Book of Acts tells us about Peter's early preaching, Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit (just as Jesus had promised), the conversion of thousands of people, healings and wonders, more preaching, meetings with the religious authorities, persecutions, the first deacons, more preaching, the stoning of Stephen, the conversion of Paul and his subsequent preaching, the growth of the church throughout the Mediterranean, more meetings and more preaching, escapes from prison, Paul's travels and adventures at

sea, the council at Jerusalem, controversies, riots, trials, journeys, and, of course, more preaching.

In between those stories and sermons are linking passages very much like this one, short summaries that come up from time to time along the way, and sound very much the same: in the midst of all these deeds, and better yet, in the midst of the working of the Holy Spirit through the apostles, the church flourished, counting more and more people as members, and through it all – they loved and followed Jesus – even unto laying down their lives for him. (I highly recommend each one of you sit down with the Book of Acts and read it for yourself. It won't take long. I have written a study guide called "Acts Comes Alive" which I would gladly share with you to assist your reading and understanding of Acts).

In Acts 2:42-47, we see the early church as a people who came together, worked together and shared all things in common. Those who had means would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. They were together daily. They broke bread together in their homes, had glad and generous hearts, praising God and goodwill for all people. Because of this singular spirit, they added to their numbers each day.

I love William Barclay's "characteristics of this church." He says, "It was a Learning Church; it was a church of fellowship; it was praying church; it was a reverent church; it was a church where things happened; it was a sharing church; it was a worshiping church; it was a happy church and it was a church whose people others could not help but liking. In other words this church had a winsome attractiveness. (William Barclay's Commentary on Acts, the Daily Bible Series, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1976, pp.28-29).

They were awesome! They inspired awe in others through the wondrous signs and deeds that God did through them. 2000 years later, how do we reflect the awesomeness of our Good Shepherd? How do we inspire others through the work of the Holy Spirit alive and active in our lives and our life together?

This week, we saw the antithesis of inspirational leadership and decision-making. This week 217 Americans who claim to represent about half our nation in the US House of Representatives, voted to take health care away from 24 million Americans who they – in part – represent. 24 million makes 7.5% of the entire population of the US! Of the 24 million, most of them will be hard pressed to have health coverage now.

In a speech I heard Nate Silver give four years ago in Washington DC at a Health Care Conference, he said that no Congress or President would ever work to overturn the Affordable Care Act because no leadership body in history would want it on their record that they took away coverage for tens of millions of Americans. Nate Silver is usually right in his forecasting. But, I guess we have found a Congress with no conscience.

Two of our “flock” – one a middle-aged man who owns his own successful business and one a young girl – will not be able to have health care coverage that will make it possible for them to live a full and robust life and contribute fully to our society. Each is an amazing person of faith. This is wrong. The end of health care coverage for 24 million people is wrong. As a Christian leader, the shepherd of this flock, I oppose the end of health care coverage for these two members and 23,999,998 others effected by the repeal of Affordable Care Act. Though every one of us can tell a story of how the ACA has not functioned perfectly, every one of us has someone in our lives who has thrived in the past seven years because they have had health care coverage. A great society is one which cares for its most vulnerable members. At this point, we are not a great society. But, we can be once again if real Christianity catches

fire in our souls and moves us to action on behalf of all our brothers and sisters in need.

All is not lost. We still can use the power of our flock to respond to this by calling the US Senate to say no. To make this right. But, we have to work fast.

Real Christianity is a lovely and beautiful thing. When we learn together, fellowship together, pray together, revere God, the earth and one another, when we make things happen, when we share with those who suffer and don't have enough to live and so joyfully, when we worship and sing; and live in the joy of the Gospel - what is not to like about us? We are winsome! We are attractive!

When we follow our Good Shepherd, all of these beautiful qualities of our life together come out. When we follow the Mrs. Gad-about of our times, we end up in fields and places where bad things happen to good people. Gad-about or the Good Shepherd? Who will we follow? Come Holy Spirit and inspire us to be awesome followers of our Awesome Good Shepherd. Amen.