

*A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 3, May 3, 2009, dedicated to Bennett Anderson Roy, son of Noah and Annie Roy, and brother of Dylan, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“The Good (Urban) Shepherd”**

**Acts 4:5-12; John 10:11-18**

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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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Today’s Gospel lesson introduces one of the most beautiful images of Jesus, that of the “good shepherd.” The good shepherd is the one who lays down his life for his sheep, knows them by name and leads them beside the still waters.

I always resonate with the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but I struggle with the image of the followers of Jesus as sheep. Most of us see sheep as slobbering, untidy, dumb animals who exist only to be sheared and slaughtered. Clearly, identifying with creatures like this breaks down the metaphor for Christians in every age.

However, speaking to shepherds and sheep farmers, one might receive a more favorable image of sheep. According to one shepherd, sheep have been cast in a bad light by cattle ranchers who put down the sheep because they do not behave like cows. True story!

In *The Preaching Life*, the Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a conversation with a sheep farmer who spoke favorably of sheep – the

voice of a good shepherd speaking well of his flock! He claimed to Barbara that while cows can be driven, sheep are led. You can crack a whip and cows will move. The same action will scatter the sheep. If the shepherd goes before them and makes sure everything is all right, the sheep will follow. Sheep also grow fond of their shepherd. As they come to know their shepherd, he can walk right through the midst of the flock and they will not move. They sense safety. However, if a stranger (say for example a cattle rancher) steps foot in the fold, all pandemonium sets loose.

The sheep consider the shepherd to be one of the family. They respond to his voice and presence. They trust him. They develop a language that only they know. They listen to the shepherd's voice and he can hear their voices, too. He knows if they are bleating in pain or pleasure. While the sheep learn that one cluck of his tongue means food and two clucks mean it is time to go home. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass., 1993, pp. 130-131)

Eight years ago while in Israel, I witnessed the Bedouins bringing their flocks home from pastures in the mountains. Not far from Jerusalem, you could see them moving through the hillsides to watering holes. It is said that hundreds of sheep from various flocks can end up at the same watering hole. But when it is time to leave, a simple whistle or word from each shepherd will separate each flock and they will all dutifully follow their shepherd home. For each flock, the voice of their shepherd is the one they will follow. (Ibid) We are drawn to this image of their good shepherd and his sheep.

In this passage, Jesus calls himself, "the good shepherd." In the Greek, there are two words for "good." There is *agathos*, which simply defines the moral quality of a thing; and there is *kalos*, which means that in the moral goodness, there is a winsomeness or loveliness to the one who is good. The first word is efficient. The second word speaks of fidelity and loveliness. Jesus is the *kalos* shepherd. I liken this to the image of the country veterinarian in *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. Like this *good doctor* of town and country who is sympathetic, gracious

and kind, the “good shepherd” is strong, powerful and kind.

But all is not as bucolic and pastoral as it appears on the surface of this metaphor. In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus calls himself “the good shepherd” at a time in which he is being challenged by the rulers of the Jews. They are pushing Jesus to claim he is something that he will not claim. They want him to claim he is better than they are. They want him to say he is “the Christ,” “the Messiah.” He knows they want to debate. They want to argue. They want to corner him and accuse him of things that are untrue to his nature, his words and actions. He declines to answer their questions because they are not in relationship with him and everyone involved knows their intent for their “good shepherd” is not good.

Jesus says, “You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep.” Jesus does not appear to be lovely and winsome to the power brokers who challenge his essence and authority. Like Matthew 25's image of separating the sheep from the goats, Jesus separates those who follow him from those who are imposters to the flock and whose motives are not on behalf of the flock, but serve some other purpose. This is the *kalos* shepherd.

Just as we struggle to see ourselves as sheep in this metaphor, we struggle even more with the thought of seeing ourselves as imposters or those who are unfaithful to the good shepherd. If we can distance ourselves from the imposters, we are comfortable with John 10. But the thought that we would be unfaithful to the shepherd is not all right in our religious view.

Each one of us wants to be “good believers” and “good followers” of the good shepherd. We don't want to be back-stabbers or gossips about the shepherd. Even the closest disciples in the upper room struggled to see themselves as those who would deny him or turn him in to the authorities. None of them, like none of us, want to be the cause of the good shepherd laying his life down for the sheep. We want to have a relationship with Jesus that holds true and stands the test of time and difficult circumstances.

Each of us also knows there is a cost to following him. We know that in the times in which we live, he calls us be counted and give an accounting of ourselves for the lives of others. Speaking of following and counting, each year on this Sunday, I call upon you to follow. I call you to step outside of yourself and join a large contingent of our congregation as we go to the Nehemiah Action together.

We are now 10 years into our relationship with the BREAD Organization – Building Responsibility Equality and Dignity. For 10 years, on this Sunday, I have begged and pleaded (at times), called and cajoled (at times), and done everything in my (last minute) power to get you to come to the meeting. We are now 30 hours away from the Nehemiah Action at Vet’s Memorial Hall, 300 West Broad St. It is time to call upon you once more to join us tomorrow night.

Through the years, I have laid out the economics and the needs of our neighbors and neighborhoods. At times I have pushed the numbers we have committed. This year we are committed to 150 and we still need at least 30 more! At times I have simply preached and prayed and done a song and dance. Last year, if you missed coming, you missed seeing me in a Land Shark outfit (something I will not do again). But, as I said then, there are no small parts, only small actors (and I am not one of the smaller ones).

Today, I am counting on you doing the right thing. As we seek to expand health care for the poor and uninsured; reclaim abandoned housing (now more than 5,000 homes in central Ohio); and strengthen our Franklin County Drug Court, we need you there. To use the image of this Good Shepherd Sunday, we need 3,000 plus sheep at the watering hole on the west bank of the Scioto River known as Vet’s Memorial.

If you have never been to a BREAD meeting, you have missed the most colorful, interfaith organizing event held annually in Ohio. With 50 congregations present – four Jewish, 44 Christian, one Unitarian Universalist and one Islamic congregation – we are quite a mix of

religious people. We are black, white, Hispanic and more. We are large and sometimes loud. We are beautiful. We are BREAD.

Yesterday, the *Columbus Dispatch* carried a letter to the editor calling for the Ohio legislature to place our Good (Urban) Shepherd, now 90 years gone, in the Capital's Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C. The "Good (Urban) Shepherd" whom I refer was our own Dr. Washington Gladden. As an original co-author of the piece, I support this effort 100%. In the letter, Dr. David Stebenne, professor of history at Ohio State University, made the case that Dr. Gladden deserves to represent us as one of two great Ohioans in that hall of 100 great Americans.

We love to claim Gladden as our pastor. We love telling the story of this building dedicated to his memory in 1931, our beautiful Gladden windows and the Gladden legacy. But sort of like claiming the good shepherd, Jesus the Christ, as our Lord, I have to ask: Unless we follow him, unless we follow Gladden as well, into the paths of social justice, why bother telling anyone we belong to this flock? Until and unless we step up as the members of the flock Gladden built, nurtured and sustained for 36 years in our current day fight for justice, we cannot and should not applaud our forebearer in faith for what he did.

I was once asked if Washington Gladden was a leader of a congregation standing together for social justice or merely a voice in the wilderness crying out by himself for what was right. Was he only a preacher or did he organize people, too? I stumble on that question. Even after reading most of his 45 books and everything I can get my hands on about him, I am not sure how to answer this question.

But I assure you we are the legacy of this great pastor. How each one of you responds to the call to be there tomorrow night matters in our time. I used to bring five of my family to this meeting each year. Now Daniel is in New York City and Luke in Tiffin, Ohio. Susan, Sarah and I will be there! I trust you and your children and grandchildren will be there as well! It is the place to be tomorrow

night! We even have child care for those who want to come but don't think their children can make it through from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. So, let's carry the flag and the carry the spirit of our pastor and shepherd, Washington Gladden, to the BREAD meeting tomorrow night. Let's all get to Vets!

As we come to the table today to receive the bread and the cup, which we call the body and blood of Christ, we know and we recall that our good shepherd laid down his life for those he loved. There is no greater love that anyone can show than to lay down one's life for a friend. May we follow him so fully that we embody love such as this. Amen.