

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter: Holy Trinity Church: May 7, 2017**

**Good Shepherd Sunday: John 10: 1-10: *I am the Good Shepherd***

**Preached**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**The words of our gospel from the Apostle John were written to 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians who were suffering hardships and persecution. Not only did they have to deal with the ordinary stresses of life, but they faced terrifying questions such as, "Will I be arrested? And if so, how will I die?" Will I be scourged to death, crucified, forced to fight the gladiators or be fed to the lions? These were ghastly and frightful issues of life and death that terrorized the early Christians. Twenty-one centuries later, the disciples of Jesus are still surrounded by ghastly and frightful issues of life and death in the form of terrorism, the potential of a nuclear war with Korea and let's not forget Syria, the Middle East and a myriad of very dangerous foreign and domestic issues. Other than the Civil War, our country has never been so dangerously fractured, as it is today.**

**In today's gospel reading, John the Evangelist introduces us to the Good Shepherd that he knows and loves so much by telling the people of his day and our day a story about Jesus. "Jesus," says John "is the gate keeper." This means he lies down at that gate protecting his sheep from the thief and the wolf. Jesus is the trustworthy one who in great love lays down his life to protect His sheep, His people. John calls us to follow him and place our trust in Jesus for he will shepherd you safely through life. The Good Shepherd will protect you. The Good Shepherd will guide you. The Good Shepherd will pick you up, place you on His shoulders and carry you. Why? Jesus says to us, "because I know my sheep and my sheep know me. My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me."**

**Patriot's Day and the running of the Boston Marathon always reminds me of when I was studying for the priesthood at St. John's Seminary in Brighton. On marathon day, we would set up lawn chairs on the sidewalk along Commonwealth Avenue grill hamburgers and hot dogs and cheer the runners on as they passed by. In April of 2013, at the finish line on Boylston Street in the Back Bay of Boston, the world watched the explosions played over and over again on TV. I saw great evil and I saw great goodness and love. I saw death. I saw shattered bodies and blood spattered streets. I saw a 78 year old exhausted runner approaching the finish line only to be knocked down by**

**shrapnel and the concussion of the bomb blast. The result of this great evil was everywhere in the death, injuries and screams of many people. But almost immediately following the blast, the world saw goodness and love explode everywhere, and we all saw the Good Shepherd everywhere. I saw the Good Shepherd in the face of the fireman carrying a young woman so terrified she simply buried her face into his chest and wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her out of harm's way to safety. I saw the love of the Good Shepherd in two guardsmen in uniform who within seconds of the blast begin pulling down barricades so Emergency Medical Services had access to the dead and wounded. I saw the love of the Good Shepherd in a runner who took off his shirt and formed it into a tourniquet and applied it to woman's leg to slow the bleeding. He then picked up the woman and carried her to safety. I saw two grains of evil and darkness on a vast and pristine beach of goodness and love. We saw the love of the Good Shepherd in action everywhere on Boylston Street in April 2013.**

**My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, we all have this image of the cuddly little lamb, but adult sheep are not the most endearing of God's creatures.**

**And the idea of a shepherd giving his life for a sheep is absurd. But Jesus is trying to say to us that this is how absurdly wonderful is God's love for us.**

**From a logical standpoint, it is absurd that God would love us that much, but**

**that's the Gospel. God really does care for us so much that God sent his beloved Son Jesus the Christ to lay down his life in our behalf. As I have said to you many times, God's love for us is beyond our wildest imaginations.**

**God knows us by name. I preach that in every funeral sermon. God knows all us of by name. God doesn't just love humanity en mass. God loves each of us intimately. God knows our name. Jesus goes on to say, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father . . ." Here's what I find so amusing: There are people who have no difficulty believing that one day the government will keep track of us all its' citizens with a GPS microchip inserted into us at birth, but who cannot conceive that an all-knowing, all loving, all powerful, Almighty God can take a personal interest in each of God's children, hear each of our prayers, and be responsive to each of our individual needs and who heals and protects us.**

**My dear friends, we are sheep! No matter how far our technology progresses it will still be painfully primitive in comparison to the mind of the Almighty God who created all that lives and moves and has its being. God knows our names. When we come before God to confess our sins and express our needs, God hears our individual petitions and is present there with us as if we were**

**the only person in the universe. If you can believe that science can track our whereabouts, how can you not believe that the God who made it possible for us to have such technologies, who created the heavens and the earth, and who makes it possible for us to probe the universe, can be individually responsive to those who call on Jesus' name? God really does care for us. God knows us by name. God wants to be in an intimate relationship with you. God wants to partner up with you as you seek to cope with the life God gave you. Jesus compares us to sheep, and there are times we are sheep. But God also call us God's children and friends, as well as, brothers and sisters.**

**Jesus the Good Shepherd calls to you, "I am the Way. I am the Truth. I am life." There is no better way. There is no greater truth. There is no happier life. But, here is the rub.**

**The Way, the Truth and the Life cannot be discovered within one's self. That's why you can read all the self-help books in the world and still be lost, confused, and frightened. No self-oriented accomplishments, no attainment of power, no amassing of great wealth, no gaining of status nor receiving the applause of the crowd, will give enduring fulfillment, security, purpose, peace, no matter what the world may say.**

**Our American culture has invested our time and our money and has placed our faith in false gods. That is the reason for the anxiety, the sense of hopelessness, and turmoil of our world. That is why fear grips us. Don't you see? All the gods are dying! All the idols our culture has fashioned for us, all the would-be shepherds we have followed, all the gods we have preferred over the one true God of peace and love have failed us. We followed them, only to watch them die. When the chips are down, when we are up against it, when we turn for help, we discover our false gods have vanished and that can be terrifying! It can be terrifying to see the shepherds we have followed passing away, to see the gods we have loved and trusted and worshiped and pursued such as materialism, great wealth, insatiable pleasures, catastrophic addictions, popularity and fame all of which have produced an abiding sense of arrogance are shattered to see them die because they are inadequate to speak to the deepest needs of our hearts and lives. The human spirit, the human soul hungers and thirsts for the truth which is the only balm to nourish and heal a sickened soul.**

**The trouble for many people is that they have abandoned the church, or at least they have relegated it to a "bit part" in their life. Church becomes a convenience at best when a sacrament may be needed. The priority of sports, ames over church just boggles my imagination. Where are we going? What**

are we thinking about? So, the power of forgiveness, the gifts of grace, the warmth of fellowship present in a church like Holy Trinity Church are absent in many lives. When people no longer feel the need to worship and by that I mean to get on their knees and thank God every day for a new day of life and for the very next breath of air we suck into our lungs, then they lose sight of the beacons which warn us of life's shattering rocks. They often forfeit the words of the Good Shepherd found in Psalm 23 which lights the path for them. *"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."* They find themselves in need of a Shepherd but they don't know where to look.

Ultimately the idol deserts us, dies on us, leaves us lost, bewildered, twisting and turning and aching in the wind. I believe that is what we see happening in our world and especially in our country at this time and every time. The gods of our culture are dying. They always do and that is a fearsome thing because our culture has staked our lives upon them. Collectively our country is divided and lost and hungers for God and spirituality that will lead to a relationship with God. The Good News, the gospel in all this is that there is so much goodness in people. There are so many Good Shepherds amongst us who rise to the occasion time and time again who will pick us up and carry us through the valley of death.

**So we, as disciples of Jesus Christ must hold before each other and the world the option of following the Good Shepherd, to declare with our lips and our lives that Jesus is indeed the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is the Good Shepherd who beckons to us in our heartbreak and in our loneliness. It is the Good Shepherd that calls out to us by name in our guilt in our shame and as we lie dying. The Good Shepherd will bring God's love to our lovelessness and God's power to our powerlessness so that now there is healing, now there is forgiveness, now there is peace, now there is direction to living, and life eternal and undying. That is the promise of Jesus, "I give you life eternal. You will never perish and nothing in all creation will ever be able to snatch you out of my hand." We need a Good Shepherd who will stand watch over our lives so that we can rest, knowing God's mighty power will protect and sustain us from the horror. No other god will do; we need the Good Shepherd who will lead us in the right Way, who will teach us liberating Truth and give us strength for Life and peace and security at this life's end.**

**Today I invite you and challenge you to listen to the call of the Good Shepherd, to accept his invitation to let Jesus be your God. Jesus came declaring his love and promising to be your God, your Good Shepherd forever. Eternal power he offers you through the Holy Spirit and safe passage through the uncertainties of life given you and especially at that last moment**

**of your life. Remember, you will not die all alone in your own arms. You will die cradled in the loving arms of the Good Shepherd. Amen.**