

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: July 22, 2018

Good Shepherd Sunday: Proper 11: Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56: *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.

In our Gospel reading today Mark tells us, “The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

Sheep without a shepherd, what a descriptive term. That was Jesus’ reaction to the multitude of people who were seeking him. “*He had compassion on*

them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Have you ever been saddened by the human condition? You know, this is a wonderful world and each of us is happy to be alive, but have you ever been touched by what I would call the “pathos” of humanity? In other words, there is something sad and almost pathetic about human beings. For all of our pride, all of our knowledge, all of our sophistication, all of our wealth and yet there are areas of our life in which we are so vulnerable, so uncertain, so insecure.

My sisters and brothers, we middle-aged and well -seasoned folks, watching young people and remembering days gone by, say knowingly, “I wouldn’t want to be 13 again for all the tea in China.” All of the struggles dealing with all of those intense feelings, we envy their youth but not their situations.

Someday, when we are sitting around in heaven we will say the same thing about our days on earth. “It was nice while it lasted, but I wouldn’t want to go back.” I think of the heartache of loving and losing. I think of all the fears and insecurities about the future, aging and dying. I think about the inability to get our act together. I think about doing all those things we know in our hearts we ought to do and leaving off those that are destructive to us. I think about the difficulty in connecting our lives to one another. I am certain that God sees our condition and God’s great love for the human person shows us

mercy and compassion upon us because we must remind God of sheep without a shepherd.

I recently read that every day in America 2,300 people are reported missing! You heard it right: 2,300 people are reported missing in this country every day. Some are displaced by natural disasters, such as wild fires in the west, lava flows and volcanic eruptions in Hawaii, hurricanes, tornados and floods. Children are abducted by distraught parents. Teenagers tired of being caught up in the abuse and chaos of a divorce trying to cope with fighting at home and school, so they run away for what they suppose will be a fresh start. An old man suffering from Alzheimer's disease simply walks away from his home. Some people fake their death, and others are taken with criminal intent. In the military it is called, "missing in action." Missing in action happens far too often for many people. Some people lose themselves in other ways. Some people choose unsavory companions and join gangs or become criminals. Some take up risky habits, drinking heavily, gambling or other habit-forming substances, such as drugs and particularly opioids. Some fall victims to violence. But some seem to just wander off, like sheep without a shepherd; perhaps looking for greener pastures. A spouse will go out for a pack of Marlboro's and never come home. The interesting thing is that many

**of these people have no interest in ever returning home to spouse and children
They are just long gone.**

Sir Thomas Beecham, British conductor and impresario, was conducting a rehearsal of Handel's *Messiah*. Beecham said to the choir, "When we sing 'All we, like sheep, have gone astray,' might we please have a little more regret and a little less satisfaction?" That's how many lost sheep are today, little regret and totally satisfied. God sees us as sheep without a shepherd. It saddens God to see us flounder about with no sense of direction, no sense of purpose, no sense of hope, with no meaning in our lives.

For this sermon, I did a little research on sheep: Sheep are prone to wander. Sheep are fragile. Sheep are defenseless. They must be watched continually. They need protection at night. Predators continually try to infiltrate the flock to kill the sheep. Sheep are short sighted. No matter how many times you bring wayward sheep back, they are prone to wander off again because they can't learn from their mistakes. That's important because sheep are defenseless and dependent. They have no natural defenses, no claws, no horns, no fangs, not even a stink bag like a skunk. To make matters worse they are top-heavy and their legs are spindly. This makes them slow. Plus, they have no camouflage, so when they are being chased by a wolf they are out of luck. And

finally, sheep are easily frightened and confused. They have been known to plunge straight over the edge of a cliff in a panic, one following right after another. Sheep are fragile and quite vulnerable, like many people.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, God sent Christ to be our shepherd. “I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says in John 10:14. “I know my sheep and they know me.” This is the Good News for the day. God not only looks upon God’s children in love with mercy and compassion, but God moved into this world to redeem those who are lost to become the Shepherd of the sheep and even more than that, God became the lamb slain on a cross for the forgiveness of sins of the world and for our salvation. We ask God, why bother with us? The answer is simple, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* John 3:16

In John 10:27 Jesus said that his sheep hear him and follow him and that he knows them. Those of us who live in the western world do not have an accurate picture of what it means to be led like sheep. Western shepherds drive their sheep from behind the flock, often using Border Collies to bark and nip at their heels. Eastern shepherds, like those in Biblical times, lead their sheep from in front.

A priest friend of mine told me about watching a shepherd lead his flock on a hillside outside Bethlehem during a visit to the Holy Land. The shepherd sat on a rock while the sheep grazed. After a time he stood up, said a few words to the sheep and walked away. The sheep followed him. My friends said, “Suddenly, John 10:27 took on new meaning: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” So often in our modern world the noise of life muffles the Shepherd’s voice. But still the Good Shepherd calls out and reaches out to us. God knows each of us by name and God cares for us as if there was no one else on earth to care for.

Jesus told a parable in Luke 15 about a shepherd who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. What does he do? He leaves the ninety-nine in the open country and goes after the lost sheep until he finds it. And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and heads home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” Then Jesus says, “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

So here is the challenge for this week. We need to see that Jesus Christ’s love for us is at the same time universal and highly individualized. The good

shepherd loves all the sheep while at the same time the Good Shepherd loves each individual sheep as if it were the only sheep in the world to love. We often wander from the flock. But there is only one who is our Good Shepherd;-always seeking to rescue us and bring us back into the fold if only we will allow God to do so.

So my sisters and brothers, are you feeling a little lost today? Maybe you feel more than a little lost. The Good Shepherd is here this day seeking to help you find your way. Jesus will always extend his hands to pull us up on his shoulders and take us once more to a safe place. Listen closely to that little voice inside of you and you will hear the Good Shepherd call you by name. Sit atop his shoulders watch closely and you will see how the Good Shepherd will change your life. Amen.