

“Intrigue and Threatened Violence in John 10”

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Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10-10

April 13, 2008

Good Shepherd Sunday is a pretty straight-forward setup, or so it would seem. We hear the 23rd Psalm or sing it, in some form, reflect on sheep and how much we are like them (usually hearing how unintelligent they are and in need of constant care) and rejoice that we are in the Good Shepherd's care. This text from John, however, doesn't make things so easy.

Oh there's enough in there to preach a sermon about sweet little lambs and a brave, bold, good, guardian shepherd but beneath the surface there is political name calling, defensive posturing, hidden meanings that left the disciples confused as to what Jesus meant and had the crowd who figured it out ready to throw rocks at Him. Hopefully, by the end of this message you'll be neither confused nor throwing hymnals at the pastor!

Jesus is speaking to a mixed crowd, you see: the Pharisees who are angry that he has healed the Man Born Blind on the Sabbath, those who have gathered to hear him because of the miracle, and his befuddled disciples. It is six weeks before the Passover when Jesus will die and the city is full of people who are there for the Festival of Booths/Remembrance of the Rededication of the Temple/Hanukah (a festival started at the time of the Maccabees).

This is where the name-calling enters as part of the Festival was the reading of Ezekiel 34 where God accused the religious and political leaders of Israel of being thieves and bandits who, under the guise of being shepherds, fleeced the sheep and scattered God's human flock. Having just called the Pharisees “spiritually blind” Jesus now calls them “thieves and bandits” who are fleecing God's sheep and leading them spiritually astray. (And you thought things had gotten ugly between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton) Jesus skillfully uses the image from Ezekiel and sends these words zinging into priests and scribes and Pharisees who bullied poor sinners/sheep into submission and hated Jesus for hanging out with the least of all people – the lowly, the needy – and he points out these false leaders had done it all in the name of religion.

If you have never experienced that kind of religious malpractice, consider yourself blessed. Most of us, however, have at least one experience (and some have a whole lifetime of it) where they have received nothing but condemnation, ostracism, and condescension from the church. They are sheep who have been bruised and battered by those who had been called to care for them – not just pastors but elders and regular members.

But no matter how battered one has been by the church – false shepherds or those who have bumbled, stumbled, or been unfaithful (and I don't know a pastor who has been perfect) there is always the voice of the Good Shepherd to follow. The voice of Jesus is always calling to us – calling us to follow – calling us to come to Him with our burdens and cares. Sheep are very fidgety animals. If they have a burr in their wool that scratches their skin, a tiny cut at the top of their hoof – the slightest thing can make them irritable. A good shepherd knows their moods and aggravations, calls each sheep over by name and checks them for wounds or sores, pulls out the burrs, applies ointments.

Parishioners can be fidgety as well. I read a letter from my old high school proctor this week (proctors were the Resident Assistants of Concordia Milwaukee who were college students assigned to care for/torture the high school students in the dormitories). He is now a hospice pastor in Florida. Proctor Krueger gave a frightening statistic: 85% of people entering the hospitals (not just hospice) have no religious affiliation. That means that only 15% belong to a church. The overwhelming majority of the unchurched mark down that they are Christian but have no denomination they belong to – and this is in the “Bible Belt” of the US. He didn't have hard statistics on his last observation but he and the other chaplains noted that almost all the people they visited with left the church because of something very minor: gossiping, their name was left out of a bulletin, the order for Sunday flowers was incorrect. Fidgety, fickle, flocks of faint-hearted followers.

We all know people, who fit into that category, don't we? People who once were faithful but now stay away – who know the truth of the faith but forsake the flock. I remember years ago when I was sitting in the pew as a teacher it seemed like the pastor was always preaching about them – the people who weren't there, who didn't show up, who had fallen away. It got to be such a regular rant I wanted to stand up and say, “I'm here! Say something nice to me!”

What I wanted, what anyone who has fallen away or forsaken the family of faith and the fellowship of believers needs to hear is the voice of Jesus – the voice of the Good Shepherd that doesn't stop calling a sheep by name because it wallowed in the mud, wandered into burrs and briars, got itself stuck on some impossible ledge with no way to safety. Even a tender shepherd can't help the pain that comes with pulling out the burrs, the sting that comes with the antiseptic to clean a wound or the lack of comfort caused by pulling a sheep by the crook of the staff to lead it to a safe spot. Correction and care are not painless – love is not all softness and soothing touches. To be cared for in the

flock means learning to listen and to follow. The voice of Jesus is the voice to follow – the voice of leadership that loves, instructs, encourages, and disciplines.

If that sounds like something that we should simply understand and then obey – well, the disciples had Jesus right there in front of them and they weren't "getting it." The Pharisees didn't seem to understand either. So Jesus tries again.

He tells them – it isn't just that I am the Good Shepherd, the one whose voice the sheep know and follow – not the robber or thief – I am also the gate – the way – the only way...the Messiah (but he doesn't use that word – just gets close enough that they start to pick up rocks to kill him as a blasphemer). He says, "I am the Gate." Now the Gate to a sheepfold was very important. It was the way into safety and the way out to pasture. It was the place the shepherd slept with his cudgel/staff at his side to make sure the thieves and robbers didn't get in at the sheep to kill them and destroy the flock. Jesus is the Gate – the strong protector who keeps those in His care from harm – and He is the one who leads them out to pastures green, to full and abundant life. Jesus is the Way!

Only God could do those things – truly protect, fully provide. The Pharisees who heard Him say this knew that Jesus was telling them He was God – God's chosen Messiah. The rage was in their hearts, the rocks were in their hands, the desire to destroy was keen – even though they knew and had seen the miracle of the man born blind. The signs and wonders were there – but still they would not hear His voice, they would not follow. Their anger and rage ultimately became the plot to kill Jesus and six weeks after this text he would be dead.

The sheep scattered when the shepherd was gone – they went into hiding. But He rose – His voice returned – by the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus came to live within their hearts and the flock reformed – shared all they had – gathered around God's Word and in prayer and daily people were added to their numbers – people who also heard the voice of Jesus calling them to faith, keeping them in the faith – bringing them through the door/the gate to become part of the family of faith.

Going through the gate/Jesus changes us, just as God has been busy changing people since Jesus walked this earth. The "gate of the sheep" has become a door; a door that swings in to welcome the wounded and swings out to send out God's servants. One day a week we gather here in the safety of this sheepfold; six days a week, God leads us/puts us, puts each of you where He wants you, where your everyday life becomes an act of praise to God and you gain the good will of others who see in you the image of the shepherd.

Let someone hear the voice of Jesus through you this week. Oh, you may have to patiently listen and even ask forgiveness for the way that they've been hurt by the church. You might have to pull out a few burrs and briars or even rescue someone from a ledge – but look for that opportunity to share the love, to be the voice of Jesus.

AMEN

Now may God our shepherd who calls us by name, continue to lead us to safety and guide us by His voice until we reach the feast He has prepared for us. Now may Almighty God, open the eyes of our faith that we may see Jesus and His redeeming work and trust Him as our companion on the way