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Good Shepherd Berkeley

GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY, April 25, 2010

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday—and we take a kind of proprietary interest in it here at Good Shepherd. Each year, the gospel reading comes from Jesus' "Good Shepherd" discourse in John's gospel. That's also where the quotations on either side of the window over the altar come from, though we didn't hear either of them read out this year.

In fact, this year's segment of the discourse may not be the most inspiring part of it. Mostly, it tells about a conflict with some very pious people who have decided that Jesus is a bad thing. Yes, they see all the good things he's done. But he doesn't agree with them and he's confusing the people and therefore he must really be very wrong and bad. Finally, Jesus kind of dismisses them by telling them that they're never going to get it because they don't belong to his flock.

The point, more broadly put, is that when people care more about hanging on to their fixed preconceptions or their social influence than they care about what's right in front of their noses, then they're probably not going to be the best of listeners. In fact, it may be pretty much impossible to get through to them at all. Of course, this can happen to any of us.

Jesus, apparently, doesn't feel the need to spend all his time on impossible cases. Maybe there will be another moment later on—a moment when our preconceptions have broken or our social status hasn't proved to be quite the warm blanket of protection we had hoped. And maybe that's the moment when we might be able to hear a voice that speaks something different. Maybe that's the moment when we could find ourselves becoming part of Jesus' flock.

It's easy to confuse this dispute with the story from Matthew about the Last Judgment and the dividing of the sheep from the goats. That's not it. There's no permanent roster of those who are in and those who are out. There's simply the reality that we may find it hard to recognize truth when it doesn't suit us—all of us, all of us human beings.

If we try to draw an absolute line between us—the good sheep—and them—the wayward ones, it becomes self-defeating. It becomes the same kind of rigid box that Jesus' opponents had drawn around themselves: we are the good people; everybody who's not a part of our group must therefore be bad. They're over there in their box talking about how the Shepherd doesn't like us; and we're hear in ours talking about how the Shepherd doesn't like them.

It would be more truthful to admit that we always live to some extent on the borderline with one foot in the flock and one outside, sometimes listening, sometimes not. When we come

to ourselves, we pay attention to the Shepherd. When we are so full of ourselves that the rising tide of our own wonderfulness starts blocking our ears, then we can't hear the voice any more.

But enough about us. Yes, we are endlessly fascinating, but I really want to talk this morning more about the Good Shepherd.

We have this image of the Good Shepherd in our window. After a while, we may almost forget about it, seeing it every Sunday as we do. But it's there and it leaves an impression on us, even if we're not conscious of it.

The Shepherd is a big, strong figure. And he's also gentle. He leads the sheep; he doesn't drive them ahead of him. He'll even carry one if he has to.

His clothes are kind of miraculously clean. But you can tell it's a dusty, dirty job. There are wild animals out in those mountains: coyotes, wolves, bears, lions. There are venomous snakes, too, well camouflaged but willing to defend their spot on a sunny rock against an intruder who comes clambering up the hillside in search of a lost lamb. And I imagine that some of these plants are actually nettles and briars.

The Shepherd, I take it, has to be a tough character: protective, but not necessarily soft. Maybe even a bit heroic on occasion.

So, that's one important image we have here, inherited from our spiritual ancestors at Good Shepherd. There's another one, too, that you may not be quite as conscious of it, since you don't sit facing it. It's hanging on the wall behind you—our church banner. And it says "Good Shepherd" on it, but what's the image? It's not a shepherd at all, it's a sheep.

The late Joe McNerney used to say that he thought somebody had got it wrong back in the '20s—or whenever the banner was made. But maybe not. After all, on *this* Good Shepherd Sunday, we had *both* images in our readings, didn't we? In the Gospel we heard Jesus speaking as the Shepherd, but in the reading from Revelation, John speaks of him as the Lamb, specifically the "Lamb that was slain."

You can see that the lamb in our banner is holding a banner, a banner within a banner. That's the banner of the resurrection. This is the Lamb that was slain and is now in the throne of God. A lamb serves as the image of ultimate victory in Revelation.

So the Shepherd is a lamb, and the Lamb is a shepherd. That's getting really confusing, isn't it? A lamb is just about the opposite of a shepherd. A lamb is the critter that gets picked up by the shepherd when it can't walk any further on its own. A lamb is vulnerable. Lambs are

what the wolves and lions—and that whole crowd—are after. Lambs don't give anybody protection; they need it themselves.

Yet, we've got our two different images, two different metaphors at either end of the church. This has the makings of chaos. What keeps them from getting into a dramatic smash-up, like two big rigs whose drivers have quit texting and looked up just late enough that they can't avoid a head-on collision?

Well, what prevents the smash-up, I suppose, is that neither image is enough by itself. We really need both images, both metaphors to get to the bottom of what Jesus is for us. He's the shepherd who protects us by heroically laying down his own life. The ravening and roaring lion of evil that had been planning to have us for lunch chomps down on him and discovers, too late, that it's bitten off more than it can chew.

And he's also the lamb that couldn't defend itself anyway. And yet, the lamb, it turns out, can make the same heroic offering as the shepherd. The turning back of evil, after all, is finally the work of God, not of us. God can take the gift of the big and strong and make something great of it. And God can take the gift of the little and weak and make something great of that.

It's a wonderful thing to have a hero who cares enough about us to defend us. But it's a much more wonderful thing to learn from the hero that we have strength, too, that even lambs can do extraordinary things.

You might think that the heroic, shepherdly sort of thing would be to smash the powers of hell with a big cudgel. But that's not what Jesus did. He defeated them by holding out to the end against their most powerful threats. And the powers of hell discover that even when they killed him they couldn't get rid of him. He was still stronger than they.

This kind of power can belong to the feeblest lamb in the flock. Even in a very rough world, a world where we keep seeing the powers of hell peeping through the blinds and plotting behind closed doors and riding through the public squares, we have power, too. We have the power to follow in Jesus' footsteps through both cross and resurrection.

He is the Good Shepherd and the Lamb that was slain, both at once. And that means that he is right where we are, facing the challenges alongside the other sheep. From that, we draw hope and courage and even some heroism for ourselves.