

Ps 23 Acts 4:5-12 1 Jn 3:16-24 Jn 10:11-18

In the name of The Good Shepherd,
The One who *knows* us and *loves* us,
and who holds us in His hands. *Amen*

Every year on the 4th Sunday of Easter,
Church tradition invites us to remember
that Jesus is ‘the good shepherd.’
That’s a problem.

Because over the years,
as the shadow of the cross
began to dominate the landscape of faith,
the image of The Good Shepherd began to take on sticky-
sweet, romanticized overtones, sentimentalizing
what is in fact, a very powerful call to follow Jesus.

Early Christians had it right to begin with.
They understood that Jesus as the Good Shepherd,
pointed towards The One who is life-giving and sustaining,
steadfast, protective and nurturing.
He was The One who offered new life, the resurrected life.

The early followers depicted this through images of Baptism, healing, feeding with fish and bread, and postures of prayer, Orans – with hands uplifted to God in thanksgiving. But after about a thousand years, the ruling shepherds of various persuasions sought control over the masses and force-fed the faithful, a daily dose of Christ crucified. And the image of the bloodied cross prevailed.

Prophets before Jesus' time, had already addressed the problem of 'bad' shepherds; denouncing the vile self-preserving hired-hands who bolted at the first sign of trouble. By the time Jesus had arrived on the scene, the Israelites had transitioned from a nomadic people to an agrarian nation. Shepherding had fallen out of favor culturally, and was now viewed with hostility, as a gritty, dangerous, and demeaning occupation.

If Jesus was attempting to rehabilitate the image of shepherding; what did he mean by 'Good'? Is it simply the opposite of 'bad'? Not quite.

Here, the Greek word ‘*kalos*’ (Strong’s #2570) means more like The ‘Model’ Shepherd. The multivalent meanings of this word fleshes out this portrait of Jesus by suggesting: one who is beautiful, commendable, honorable, noble, worthy and seen to be so, praiseworthy, motivating and inspiring.

Is it possible to excavate ‘the *good* shepherd’ out from under the theological muck heap of the centuries? How can we apprehend the significance of His truth?

One biblical commentator suggests that a more modernized metaphor would have Jesus say, “I am the good migrant worker.”

(Nancy R. Blakely, *Feasting on the Word Year B Vol. 2*, 2008 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 450)

But in our current societal turmoil revolving around calls for police reform, can we imagine Jesus might say, “I am the good officer.”

And I do believe the prophets would stand by the conviction of Derek Chauvin as a shepherd gone ‘bad’.

As I stated in Bible Study on Wednesday,
it is not a crystal clear nor black and white issue.
Or as Tom W. put it, “there are a million shades of gray.”
Hair-trigger protests often erupt without solid facts.
Sides are chosen without full understanding.
Even our gospel reading is taken out of context!

It really begins at 9:39 when Jesus declares,
“For judgment I came into this world,
that those who do not see, may see,
and that those who see may become *unseeing*.”
The Pharisees were notably agitated
because they felt the weight of Jesus’ accusation –
and their implied status as ‘bad shepherds’
further along in the passage.
Jesus goes to great lengths to make clear his intent,
which only leaves the listeners confused and divided
as the narrative concludes at verse 21.

What is abundantly clear,
is that Jesus, by His life, shows us the way,
to be the ‘good shepherd’.

Regardless of meaning negated or piled on top-
the tradition of The Good Shepherd lives on in Christendom.
Thinking about the many places
where we seek protection and care –
and those to whom we look towards as ‘good shepherds’
it raises the question: “*Who* is called” to be a good shepherd
in the way that Jesus – the Supreme Good Shepherd models?

In The Episcopal Church,
we might first look towards our Presiding Bishop,
The Most Reverend Michael Bruce Curry.
As the elected Shepherd of our Church in this country,
we can be assured of his ‘good’ wisdom and guidance;
hearing his words of inspiration and hope,
especially in such difficult situations
as the trial after George Floyd’s death.

Awaiting the verdict he said,
“Our pain persists and our grief goes on.
May we not be paralyzed by our pain, our fear, and our anger.
May we learn, as the Bible teaches,
to ‘love *not* in word and speech but in truth and in action,’
truth and action that leads to justice and healing.”

After the verdict he reminds us of the hard challenge of following the Way of Love.

Bp Curry tells us, “There is no celebration. Nothing, will bring George Floyd back to his family or his community. Please pray for the soul of George Floyd, for his family, and for everyone everywhere who has suffered because of the sin of racism and oppression.”

Casting our gaze closer to home, shepherding Episcopalians in Maine is our diocesan bishop, The Rt. Rev. Thomas James Brown.

We are reminded of his care and oversight with each official pastoral visitation.

With 58 parishes and ministries under his crozier, that equates to a visit about every 2 years.

That’s his chair awaiting his presence and while he’s away, as your Vicar aka Priest-in-Charge, I’m the one who ‘keeps the seat warm.’

And it will need to be warm as his next visit is on Dec. 5th just after the Feast of St. Andrew’s.

I do my best to be ‘a good shepherd’ of St. Andrew’s.

But I am not ‘The’ good shepherd.

[story of Good Shepherd Sunday at The Crossing 2012]

As the ‘good people’ of St. Andrew’s,
and followers of Christ,

we are all called to be ‘good shepherds’.

That’s fine to say, but what does it *really* mean
to be ***a good shepherd?***

[Answers]

What does it mean to us,
that Jesus willingly lays down his life for the sheep?

Aren’t we grateful for the many law enforcement officers,
who do precisely that every day?

What about those who serve in the military?

Maybe I’m a glass half-full kind of gal,
but I believe that most of those serving in our armed forces
have ‘good shepherding’ instincts.

But not all, and it’s true in our religious institutions,
civic institutions, and anywhere we go!

So how do we discern who is a good shepherd or bad?

And do we each interpret what Jesus means by his insistence that he has *other* sheep that do not belong to *this* fold; that He must bring them in also.

“There will be one flock, one shepherd.”

These are valid questions that we must ask earnestly in faith. It's crucial to make time to *pray* these scriptures accompanied by some good shepherding from the Spirit!

Collectively, nestled among the ‘fold’, like Matryoshka nesting dolls, we are asked to faithfully model the Christian life as ‘good shepherds’ and all that it entails.

We do that by *believing* in His Name, loving and serving: family, friend, neighbor, stranger, enemy. *And questioning*: How do we *know*, what do we do, what do we believe, how do we live?

Later in John's gospel, Jesus prays to God on behalf of his disciples, a final prayer before his crucifixion.

His bidding prayer is especially for their *unity*,
based on God's love and protection for them *sent*,
out in a hostile world full of dangers
and wolves with barred teeth;
to *fearlessly* share the truth of God's word.

Let us pray:

“Holy Father, protect them
in Your name that you have given me,
so that they may be one, as we are one.
While I was with them, I protected them... I guarded them...
I am *not* asking you to take them *out* of the world,
but I ask you to protect them from the evil one...
Sanctify them in truth. Your Word is truth.

As you have sent me into the world,
so I have sent them into the world...
I ask also on behalf of those who *will* believe in me
through *their word*, that they may all be one
as you Father are in me and I am in you,
may they also be in us,
so that the world may believe....” Amen (Jn 17)

The world won't believe in words they cannot hear!

How will the world know God's love?

Love is incarnational; flesh on bone.

Love is a verb, "Let us love, not in word or speech,
but in truth and action." (1 Jn 3:18)

Love is walking the talk,

measured in the ordinary self-sacrifices made daily.

Love covers a multitude of sin.

Jesus shows us, love does not run away.

Loves does not snatch or scatter the sheep.

Love lays down life willingly for another.

Love is not blind but sees and feels the truth.

What are the 'metrics' that reveal *my* love, make it known?

Make God's love knowable.

How will people come to know Jesus, The Good Shepherd?

How can I be a good shepherd in these times?

This is our *unattainable* goal,

to be the good shepherd and love one another;

unattainable that is, except by the love of Jesus.

Amma Susan

<https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/04/20/episcopal-leaders-pray-for-victims-of-racism-as-ex-officer-found-guilty-in-killing-of-george-floyd/>