

## Sermon Manuscript

Grace and Peace be to you from the one who leads us with his loving voice, prods us with his gracious staff, and by his mercy stands at the gate offering us both welcome and refuge, our one and only good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen!

It has been a very rewarding and enjoyable eight months being part of this community. I realize that many of you have and will say kind words about Ann Marie's and my time here in Croton, and I will receive those in the spirit of grace in which they are offered. But you need to know that I owe all of you a debt of gratitude for welcoming me for this too short, but God-blessed period of time.

I can reflect on many joyous times together, including my very first baptisms, my first group of first communicants, joyous celebrations of Christmas and Easter, and continuing to develop the Soul Café as a forum to foster conversation about the word of God. You have given me a precious gift – the confidence as I move to a new call that I can indeed be a pastor or shepherd of a faith community. In the Soul Café, yesterday, when I was making similar comments, Eric Golberg mentioned to me that a pastor can have only one first congregation to serve, and I'm grateful that this was the one.

I think it's fitting that my farewell to you occurs on a day set aside to remember Jesus Christ as The Good Shepherd. It's fitting because the rhythms and vicissitudes of life never

permit us to linger in one place for too long. Sheep and shepherds come and go. Sheep feed on tall grass, and when that grass has been organically mowed, they move on to other pastures and the cycle repeats.

Each time life throws us a change-up (you knew I had to mix in at least one more baseball metaphor in today's sermon), it is comforting to know that we follow Christ, the Good Shepherd, the one who we know always leads us to nourishment by still waters, the one who promises to restore our restless souls, the one who protects us and leads us to life, even when we only see the unknown, or impending pain and death in front of us. Yes, it is fitting that I bid you farewell today, because I can leave you where you have always been - in the loving care of Jesus, Our Good and Loving Shepherd.

A typical approach pastors will take to explicate the gospel on Good Shepherd Sunday, is to relate to his congregation the many ways in which sheep are claimed to be the dumbest animals in the world, and are therefore completely lost without a shepherd to lead them to food, water and safety. And while it's true that sheep don't quite possess human intellectual prowess, dwelling unnecessarily on this fact risks focusing attention on ourselves more than pointing us to Christ and the ways in which a shepherd is such an apt metaphor for the relationship Jesus has with all of us and what Jesus does for us.

This relationship between Shepherd and flock, between Christ and the people of God is one marked by a deep intimacy and knowledge that indeed recognizes the dependency of the sheep, but also illustrates the grace that marks the life of the shepherd.

In her book, *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a conversation she had with a friend who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. According to him, sheep are not dumb at all and it is cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that rumor - all because sheep behave differently than cows. Cows are accustomed to being herded from the rear, somewhat violently I might add, by hooting cowboys with cracking whips.

But sheep require a different approach to move about. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows, her friend said, but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first. Their shepherd goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right." Sheep know their shepherd and their shepherd knows them." The shepherding relationship is one that is based on the authority of love, care and gentle persuasion, not the authority of power and force, and coercion.

This is why the image of Christ, our Good Shepherd is perhaps the most beloved and enduring image we have to reflect the fullness of Christ's relationship to his people. I think that's true because the metaphor is multivalent in what it communicates to people of faith.

Of course, the shepherd is clearly a leader and guide who the sheep trust to keep them safe and to find nourishment to sustain and help them grow. We confess this each time we say the oft-memorized 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie in

green pastures, and leads me by the still waters". This image of Christ is pastoral and peaceful, and we are comforted to know that all things can be faced if we follow the lead of the one true and good shepherd.

Our Good Shepherd is the pastoral and peaceful, non-anxious presence that we follow into the unknown. It is that presence in our lives that we rely upon in times of doubt, struggle, tragedy and fear. But to be that paragon of calm, one must have an inner strength and resolve in which followers can remain confident. Our Good Shepherd is sensitive enough to free us from our fears and strong enough to also serve as protector of the flock unflinching in the face of danger, committed to those under his care.

Instead, the shepherd leads us away from danger, the things that would seek to hurt us or even take our lives from us. Ever present, he never thinks of leaving the sheep to fend for themselves, preferring to give up his own life, rather than endanger any under his care. The life of the community is all Jesus cares about, and he inspires any actions that are life-giving, and guides us away from those things that put life in jeopardy.

Our Good Shepherd is also committed to never giving up on us. Even though we stray off the path of discipleship, engaging in our own life-jeopardizing activities, the watchful shepherd both calls and prods us into returning to the fold, never desiring that even one of us

be lost forever. This shepherd is faithful to his flock, and to his mission of care even for those who don't love him back.

The voice of Jesus always resounds high above other voices, calling his people to choose life, an abundant and rich life, a life not freed from the realities, the challenges, the frailties of living, but one in which we live a resurrection life, freed from fear and freed from limitations those fears place upon each of us.

I can't understate the importance of Jesus claim to have to come that we all may have life and have life abundantly. Next to John 3:16, it may be the most recognized verse in all the Gospels. And it is so, because it forms a foundational key to understanding the rest of scripture. And that key is this – The Good Shepherd is all about life, life giving and life enhancing activities. If we read scripture and come away with an understanding that takes life, limits life, or damages life, then it is not the Gospel that we are finding in God's Word.

Understanding this helps us deal effectively with those more difficult passages in scripture and we have one here as Jesus, the Good Shepherd claims also to be the gate. This is an often-misunderstood metaphor which some people have used to justify the separation of some privileged sheep from others – as if the Good Shepherd only allows a certain kind of sheep to be admitted to his care.

Without a key that puts such interpretation to the test, one can understand why we might see the gate's purpose to exclude the unworthy – as if we needed the Shepherd's protection from the wrong kind of sheep. In that case, the gate is life-giving for some, but life-taking for others.

We then get caught up in an identification and qualification process in which we delude ourselves into thinking that we know why some of us follow the Good Shepherd and others are outside that fold. We assign ourselves a type of privilege, and the gate becomes less about life-giving leadership and protection, and more about the life-emptying process of keeping out, or even worse, casting out, the unworthy.

However, by holding Jesus' claim to bring abundant life as the standard of interpretation, we cannot see the gate's purpose in any way to prevent other sheep from entering. The gate is not there to keep the sheep out, but to provide the assurance to all those inside the gate, that Jesus stands at the entrance to keep away those who might want to do harm to the sheep. The gate, you see, is not an image of exclusion, but is an image of God's grace to free us from fear, and therefore to live abundant lives.

The key to understanding Jesus as the gate, is not to assume it is a tool for sorting the good sheep from the bad sheep, but to give us assurance that our connection to Christ is always

a life-giving and life-enhancing relationship. This Good Shepherd engages only in life-giving activities for the good of all those under his care and calls us to value life in exactly the same way.

The gate is always an instrument of life, never a separator that dooms some to death while selecting others to live. The stated Gospel values of welcoming the stranger, loving our enemies, turning the other cheek and caring for the poor are all connected to the life-giving properties of discipleship we hear from the voice of our Good Shepherd.

The values of the Good Shepherd are intended to become the same values that guide the sheep under his care. One thing that is true about sheep, is that they like to be close to each other, and by doing so the leadership of the Good Shepherd is enriched and enhanced. Behind the gate we walk alongside each other, helping each other follow along as best we can. I'm reminded of Martin Luther's famous saying – We are all beggars, telling each other where we can find some bread.

And so it comes time to say goodbye after eight very special months in life of this bumbling shepherd's apprentice standing before you. And good bye is the appropriate thing to say in a moment like this, because the origin of this very common form of greeting is that it is a shortened form of the phrase "God Be With You". And so Ann Marie and I say good-bye today, not from the perspective that we never intend to see each other again, but as a reminder that as people come and go throughout our lives, it is always the God, the Good Shepherd who

remains with us, guides us, protects us, and desires that we live our lives the fullest. And so I  
say Good Bye! AMEN.