

3 May, 2009
Fr. Richard L. Green

Well, this Sunday is sometimes known as Good Shepherd Sunday. And these stories, using the 23rd Psalm and the reading from the gospel of John where Jesus is said to have told his followers that he is the good shepherd, it's wonderful imagery that we have. Though most of us have little or no experience of sheep or shepherds outside of a nice sweater. But shepherding actually began about 7,000 years ago. It was part of that earliest agricultural flowering. As people began to gather together and move out of the hunter/gatherer societies and become more sedentary. Practicing agriculture usually in the river valleys and in the nice, alluvial soils. They also began to notice that there were these wild critters that seemed to be a good source of things like their wool, their meat, their milk from which they made, uh, Camembert, I think... uh, cheese. But it's one of the earliest flowerings of the agricultural experience.

And oftentimes it was relegated to those who were willing to not stay in the agricultural community. Because with crops, you know, you finish your day's work and you go back to your house and get up the next day and the fields don't move around. The sheep, they eat the grass, then what? They can't just wait for the grass to grow before they have another meal. So they would have to go someplace else. So by definition the shepherds are moving. They're taking them up into higher ground; they're having to move the flock around. So oftentimes in some places it was young men and in some cases young women were charged with this. But they became kind of a separate and distinct part of society, sort of set aside.

So what did shepherds do? They feed the sheep, they help them move to areas where there's food available. They take care of them when they're sick or hurt. They protect them from predators – them and the dogs, who at about the same time were being domesticated for this very purpose. Sort of the wolves becoming fighters of wolves. Because they know wolf-ing.

And so this whole role of nurture is attributed to the shepherds. Care, nurture, protection. But it's not like there was nothing in it for the shepherds. As I said, they get the wool, the meat, the milk and cheese, so it was a mutually beneficial system that was established. It was good for the sheep; it was good for the shepherd and for the shepherd's community.

I think that this is an important thing for us to keep in mind, that it is a mutually beneficial relationship.

So now it's roughly 2,000 years after the time Jesus was talking about being the good shepherd. It's even more than that since we get the 23rd Psalm about God being our shepherd. I daresay that if we're waiting around for Jesus to shepherd us, it's going to be a long wait. Because Jesus, the man Jesus, hasn't been around for a good long while.

In fact, if we look at that bit from the Acts of the Apostles and also from the epistle of that first letter of John, it appears to me that the shepherding role has been passed on. Now, in many of our traditions where we have bishops, they carry a crosier, a shepherd's crook, as a symbol of their office. Not only that though, but it's symbolic of the shepherding that we're all called into. The bishop is not just the only shepherd. Nor is the priest, the pastor, the only one. But it's a symbolic role. It's symbolic of the shepherding that is a part of our life in Christ for all of us. I'm not the only one here. Greg Rickel is not the only one in the diocese of Olympia, or Nedi Rivera. Their role is symbolic of the shepherding that we're all engaged in so we are functioning both of the roles: We are both flock and shepherd. And there are times when we are called into both of those functions and we need each other to do that.

If there are no flock who are sometimes in need of shepherding, of nurture, of protection, then there's no need for shepherds. And so we need each other. Sometimes we're shepherd, sometimes we're flock. It's part of our role, it's part of who we are as the body of Christ in the world. If Jesus was the Good Shepherd, we are called to follow in his footsteps and be that for one another.

I see that in this congregation all the time. I saw that probably five minutes ago. Now, I don't want to embarrass anybody, but I will. Lou was coming down the stairs. Lou is not as sure on her feet as she used to be. Alan [was] right up there with her. Shepherding. It happens when people go to visit each other when their sick. Take them something to eat. Maybe bring them communion. Maybe just sit and visit. Maybe call them on the phone, maybe visit them in the hospital or give them a ride someplace. Take them to the doctor, and think nothing of it. And yet that's precisely the kind of thing that I'm talking about. When we need each other, being there for each other is shepherding. It's all of us together, shepherding one another.

And there have been times when we're shepherding and don't even know it. When we just happen to say the right thing at the right time, almost in spite of ourselves, that just touches somebody's heart. It's just exactly what they needed to hear or experience with somebody. Just a hand on the shoulder, a hand on the back or just a smile sometimes is what it takes to get us through.

It's clearly not limited to just us. In this first letter of John, how does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's good and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? You know we're called to go beyond just our immediate circle. To me that's talking about all of those in need. To help find the means that provide actual help and growth. To help one another, whether it's from material poverty, spiritual poverty, psychological and emotional poverty – whatever it is, wherever we are poor. To reach out to folks and bring what it is that we have, whether it's material help or help of the heart. We are called to reach out into the world. We are not just little islands. This is an island that is supposed to grow and grow and grow.

It's not about just making the organization bigger so we can get more income, so we can have a bigger building and impress our neighbors. It's about sharing that life which

we have been given; the shepherding that we have received from Christ and from all of his descendents down through the ages to the present who have passed on to each generation to reach out and share that growth in *human wholeness* to a world that's clearly hurting.

Maybe what we're called to do is to go and build houses with Habitat [for Humanity]. And to work with the FISH program, providing food. Or maybe in the midst of near-panic over swine flu, we're called to be just a little voice of calm in the midst of the storm and to tell people to stop listening to the radio or the television or the newspapers.

Sometimes we have to boldly step forward – I remember at the height of the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco; our bishop, Bill Swing, stood defiantly at the front of the cathedral at the end of communion when people were terrified that you were going to get AIDS from drinking from the common cup (and he had to correct them that that's not how you get AIDS) and [he] would drink from the common cup after three or four or five hundred people had all been drinking from it. He would just stand there and say, 'We're all in this together.' Sometimes it's crazy, what we do. And sometimes that madness is the only sanity in town.

We're called to be shepherds of one another and to be flock for each of our shepherds, and also to reach out into the world; to take our shepherd's crook out into the world to nurture and protect and heal and to bring that heart with us, a transformed life with us, as we take this broken and pain-filled world by still waters and into those green pastures.

Amen.