

It's the fourth Sunday as Easter which is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, this is the Sunday in which our gospel has Jesus refer to himself as the good shepherd.

How many of you have ever been on a sheep farm?

How many of you have ever known a shepherd?

How many of you have ever seen a sheep?

Ok, that last one was an easy one.

The most interesting fact I read about sheep in doing my research for today's sermon was that they need to be led as opposed to driven from behind. Apparently if you try to drive a flock from behind the sheep will not move forward. Instead they will run around behind the person urging them onward just so they can be led. This tells me that they have their own particular way of being animals in God's kingdom.

I ran through the questions to remind us that this metaphor is not one that really resonates for us in our day-to day lives, yes; we have heard Jesus referred to as the good shepherd ever since we have been coming to church. Certainly there are countless images of Jesus as the good shepherd with a lamb around his neck or some other interactions with something that looks fluffy and sweet. Such images convey compassion and caring, tenderness and protection.

Conversely just about every Christmas Eve I remind you that shepherds were outcasts in Israel, kind of grubby misfits, rough and tumble ...and all alone with their sheep. All right don't go there. At the same time we have all kinds of references in the various cultures of the ancient Middle East in which the kings or rulers were referred to as the shepherds of their people, especially throughout the Old Testament.

It's funny that the myth and the reality should be so very different, isn't it? Yet the metaphor really comes together in that image of God as the Good shepherd – as we see in this morning's beloved 23rd psalm. This is the God who provides safe space, safe passage, a place to rest, places to eat and to drink. The psalmist is confident that God will protect him or her from danger, that they need fear no evil. It is an image of everlasting abundance. It's a beautiful vision and one that calls us to put our trust in God alone.

Not only is Jesus claiming this image for himself when he talks about himself as the "Good" Shepherd he is using an adjective that can be interpreted in two ways. The first is that of how we think of someone we call "good". This is probably someone who is morally and ethically sound, upright, kind...; you can insert the adjective here all of which we can certainly apply to Jesus. The other interpretation, according to many of the commentaries is that good actually means model, i.e. someone to be emulated which is how this parable applies to us. This is where the parable can go in many different directions so I want to focus on just one, the implications of what it means when Jesus says *"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again."*

Jesus is of course alluding to his upcoming crucifixion, his willingness to die for his friends. In this we have the fundamental call to sacrifice in the name of love. This is a hard call

and it challenges us when we try to take it to heart. Most of us are not going to be called to die for our faith but there are sacrifices that we are all called to make in the name of love: a mother or father for their child, a child for his or her parents, one spouse for another, one fellow soldier for another in the military and so on. Yet I feel that we tend to focus on the first part of the sacrifice, the loss, and not the return that comes from sacrifice. This is not about someone who martyrs themselves and holds everyone hostage because of it nor is it about someone who has no sense of self-worth and therefore cannot take themselves up again once they have made a sacrifice. Nor do I mean to imply that there is a quid pro quo or it wouldn't be a sacrifice but there is something we get when we give of ourselves without thought of return.

Jesus didn't say I lay down my life for my friends and I'm going to stay dead for them too. No, he said that he would lay down his life and take it up again.

Jesus' glorification came in being willing to go to the cross trusting that God would raise him not just from the dead but back into heaven. The trust element there is huge. It's probably the thing that as human beings we have the hardest time doing, trusting that if we let God, in God all things will be made well. Granted it doesn't mean it's not going to hurt like heck in the meantime but that is what transformation in God is all about.

Jesus calls us to let go, to let go of what we think we know to be true and to trust that we can lay down our lives because we will be able to take them up again. The danger I think comes in looking at this in absolutist terms that it is always about life and death in a physical sense and not about living life to the fullest, and it is fullness of life that Jesus offers to us all. The distinction was brought home to me yesterday morning.

Earlier this week the David, the husband of my first cousin died unexpectedly while they were on vacation. He was only 58, he died in his sleep. His family is of course devastated. He and my cousin had a good marriage, 2 grown sons, and a new grandchild. David was a successful business man respected and beloved by his employees, his customers, his friends, his extended family, and the numerous civic associations to which he belonged. There was even a declaration read by a member of the Delaware State legislature in recognition of all of his work. The church was packed with hundreds of people. David's charisma, his gift was his ability to connect. Person after person spoke about his willingness to reach out to call people to find out what was going on in their lives to find out what he could do for them. Each time he reached out he laid his life on the line and each time a connection was made he was able to pick it up again having made the world a better place.

Now think about your own lives: a teacher lays it on the line every single day – some days it may feel like they can't pick it up again but then there are days when something connects and they are able to remember why they went into teaching in the first place. I could draw parallels with most every profession you can mention, whether it is sales or customer service, providing medical care, any kind of physical labor, any of the arts, athletes... Athletes you might ask? Well think about it every time an athlete gets up to play they are laying everything they are capable of right out there in the open for the benefit of those who have come to watch. Sometimes they are successful and sometimes not but the self-offering is there and they pick it up again every time they re-enter the court or the stadium. And of course the most

obvious is parenting. Which parent out there would have given their all to protect their children? Ok maybe not all the time but the principle is there.

So that self-offering, that laying down our lives is something we can do every day, it's a matter of how we reframe how we think about what we are doing and in whose name and being open to the transformation we experience because we can take up our life again.

We are changed when we connect with someone; our world grows a little bit bigger, our capacity to accept differences, to recognize our common humanity, expands our ability to love – fulfilling the new commandment Jesus gave to his disciples at the Last Supper.

May you see how you too have been called by the Good Shepherd. May you be rewarded with the power to continue what you have been called to do in the name of the Good Shepherd, the one who lay down his life and took it up again for all of us sheep.

Amen.