

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Easter 4A 2008

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today our Gospel lesson is the beginning of John's image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The church in which I was ordained (St. John's in Boonton, N.J.) has a beautiful Tiffany stained glass window of the Good Shepherd. It was given by a former rector in memory of his young daughter and Jesus is cradling a young lamb in his arms. It is a beautiful and comforting image, but I think John is saying a lot more in his Gospel than the comforting image of that window.

Here is some information on First Century sheep raising that will help us understand today's lesson. Shepherds grazed the sheep in meadows and hillsides near the village. At night they would put the sheep in a sheepfold made of stones or twisted branches and brambles. The sheepfold would have one gate and the shepherds took turns sleeping in the gate to protect the sheep from thieves and predators. In the morning, the gatekeeper would open the gate for the shepherds. The shepherds would call out the pet names for their sheep or make their distinctive sound or whistle and the sheep would recognize the call and separate to follow their own shepherd out into the fields. In the evening, the process would be repeated and the sheep would separate out to follow their own shepherd as he led them back to the safety of the sheepfold for the night.

Jesus tells his listeners that only the ones that enter by the gate are the shepherds, any others who climb in by another way are thieves and bandits. The sheep will not follow them but will run because they do not recognize the voice of the stranger. John says that the audience did not understand this figure of speech that Jesus used. So Jesus said, “I tell you I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits...I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

So who is Jesus addressing and in what context? What don't they understand and why? Context is crucial to understanding this text. Jesus is addressing the Pharisees. He is continuing the discussion from Chapter 9 when he cured a blind beggar on the Sabbath by making mud and putting it on his eyes. We read that chapter on the 4th Sunday of Lent six weeks ago. You remember, the Pharisees questioned the son who only said that this man Jesus made mud, put it on my eyes and now I see. Then the Pharisees questioned the parents who deflected them back to the son. When the son challenged their opinion that Jesus was a sinner, they told the son that he himself was born entirely in sin and drove him out. It was after the Pharisees drove this man out of their community that Jesus comes to him and reveals himself as the Messiah.

Today's lesson is a continuation of the heated conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. They do not understand Jesus' figure of speech whereby he calls them thieves and bandits. After all, in Jesus' time they were the ones who were holier and purer than anyone. They kept all the Levitical laws and brought the strict observance of temple purity codes into their daily lives. Surely Jesus must be talking about

somebody else! It is also helpful to note that in times that John's Gospel was written, almost 80 -100 years later, the Pharisees were the sole surviving branch of Judaism and were throwing followers of Jesus, such as John's community, out of the synagogues.

So what does this have to do with us today? Jesus in talking about shepherds and the sheepfold gate is talking about Himself and us. It is all about relationship! A shepherd is meaningless without sheep; a sheepfold gate that encloses and protects is meaningless without the flock. It is by entering the gate that a sheep becomes part of the flock. It is by recognizing the call of the shepherd that the sheep get fed. It is Jesus' role as gate to let the sheep enter and become one flock. It is Jesus' role as gate to keep out those who would steal and kill and destroy. We are talking about a relationship of ownership – not in the sense of legal ownership or control, but an identification of interest and loyalty so intense that what happens to one happens to the other.

Once when I was in the locker room at the gym in N.J., I saw some muscle head give a guy a hard time over some minor misunderstanding. His friend spoke up and the muscle head said, "Shut up! I'm talking to him." The friend replied, "When you're talking to him like that you're talking to me!"

That's what Jesus is saying to the Pharisees. "When you give this poor blind beggar a hard time by telling him and the community that he was born in sin because of his physical impairment – you are talking to me! When you keep him out of the temple because he is blind, you are talking to me! When you would rather leave him blind than have me make a bit of mud on the Sabbath to give him sight, you are

talking to me! When you would cast this one who believes in me out of your fold, you are talking to me!

This is the type of community John has Jesus building. The love that Jesus speaks of in John's Gospel – "God is love" or "love one another as I have loved you" – is not some emotional sentiment but this type of total identification with the other.

Recently on our Episcopal Church calendar we celebrated the feast days of two men whose faith was both controversial and courageous. On April 4th we celebrated the feast of Martin Luther King, Jr. – a good Baptist by the way. It was the 40th anniversary of his assassination in Memphis. The good Christian ministers of Birmingham begged him not to come to their city. It was too divisive, too soon, too controversial. It would upset their congregations. Read their letter and his response in the Letter from a Birmingham Jail and ask who speaks for Christ. On April 9th we celebrated the feast of Dietrich Bonhoeffer – a good Lutheran by the way. When the Nazis took over the churches and seminaries in Germany, Bonhoeffer was part of the Confessing Church that refused to accept Nazi racism and control. He returned to Germany from safety in New York to teach in a seminary, was implicated in a plot to kill Hitler, arrested and hung in Schoenberg Prison on April 9, 1945 weeks before the end of the war.

This kind of discipleship has been going on since the earliest days of the Church. In our first reading from the Book of Acts is about the first martyr of the Church being the Deacon Stephen. Who knew being a waiter could be so dangerous! The first martyr was stoned for showing compassion to the poor, not for preaching! Showing compassion to the needy has always been far more threatening to the status

quo than anything that could be spoken. Embracing the stranger speaks louder to power than anything that could be written.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is talking about the ownership that arises from compassion. Well what about us? Can be a church that sees the starving and the hungry and say "When you talk about them, you're talking about me"? Can we be a church when we see people being killed and beaten in Wyoming or Nigeria and say "When you talk about them, you're talking about me."? Can we be a church that sees legal 30% interest enslaving people in hopeless debt and says "When you are talking about them, you are talking about me"?

If we cannot be such a church, that's fine with me – I am certain that God will raise one up. You see, despite all our efforts to push ourselves into the role of gatekeeper or shepherd, Christ reserves that role for himself. Yes, King was shot and Bonhoeffer was hanged and Stephen stoned to death outside the city walls, but they entered through the gate and when that happens, God always has the last word. That is why we are an Easter People.

Amen.