

**Sermon, The Reverend David A. Stout**  
**May 3, 2009**  
Easter 4 • YRA

John 10:1-10 • Good Shepherd Sunday

In keeping with the theme of today, which is referred to as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” I’d like to share this story:

Two guys are hiking through the woods and come across this big deep hole. “Wow... that looks deep,” one observed. “Sure does... toss a few pebbles in there and see how deep it is,” replied his friend. So they pick up a few pebbles and throw them in and wait... no noise. “WOW. That is REALLY deep.” “Here,” the friend said, “throw one of these great big rocks down there.” Nothing. They look at each other in amazement. One gets a determined look on his face and says, “Hey...over here in the weeds, there’s a railroad tie. Help me carry it over here. When we toss that in, it’s GOTTA make some noise.” The two men drag the heavy railroad tie over to the hole and heave it in. Not a sound comes from the hole. Suddenly, out of the nearby woods, a sheep appears, running like the wind. It rushes toward the two men, then right past them, running as fast as its legs will carry it. Suddenly it leaps in the air and disappears into the hole. The two men are astonished with what they’ve just seen. Then, out of the woods comes a farmer who spots the men and ambles over and says, in a confused voice: Hey... you two fellows seen my sheep out here? “You bet we did!” on replied. “Craziest thing I ever seen! It came running out of the woods and just jumped right into this hole!” “Nah,” says the farmer, “that couldn’t have been MY sheep. My sheep was chained to a railroad tie.”

Ahh ... LIFE IN COMMUNITY! So often, we don't realize it how our lives are tied together.

The other day I read Mitch Alcomb's book, "The Five People You Meet in Heaven." Have you read this book? It is a great little read. It is the story of a man who worked all his life at a seaside amusement park. He is disappointed at life — he believes he has lived an uninspired life — so much so that he has become jaded — he eventually dies. When he gets to heaven there are five people waiting on him. The deal is he can spend as much time with each of them as he wants. Some of them he knows, others he doesn't. But, what they all have in common is the fact that choices they had made or things that had happened in their life affected his life.

Like it or not, we are tied together.

- You put your house up for sale the bid you accept has affect on the price of your neighbors.
- You take a chance on attending at attending a church's dinner or fellowship event and you end going home with more than a full stomach – you home with a full heart.
- A newly ordained priest, comes to visit the Island of Maui after his ordination, visits your parish, and he becomes your much beloved, priest-in-charge.

Our lives are tied together, in ways we may never know.

In the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, just a few verses before our reading for today, we hear how the community, the congregation, went so far as to "sell their possessions

and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” –That “day by day they gathered together to pray.” They would break bread together and with glad and generous hearts.” What a picture of community! If only life in a congregation could be that way – all the time! But, you who are members of a parish family, be it Holy Innocents or some other parish, know that it is not.

As we see in our reading for today—it only takes flipping a few chapters forward to realize that things didn’t stay that way for long. That began to face real trials and challenges in their life together: The honeymoon was soon over; The wedding cake long gone; And the marriage had begun. Anyone who has been in a long-term relationship knows that feeling.

Someone once said that life in the church is like a group of porcupines trying to stay warm on a cold, cold night. Too close to one another and we hurt each other – too far away and we freeze to death.

Yet, I love being a parish priest. I particularly love being priest in a smaller community. There is something about how our lives are tied together in a smaller community to which I am drawn. I like the fact the people I worship beside are many of the same people I live beside, or stand beside in the line at the grocery store, or walk beside on the boardwalk or sidewalk. There is something about not being able to escape from one another. We are forced to find a way to live together—to be together even when at times we might struggle to like each other.

“Life is one big lesson in forgiveness”, a mentor of mine used to say. A congregation

is not club for Saints, it is a hospital for sinners. It is a group of people who have come to know their need for God. Here, we come to practice what our faith so we can be sent out to live it in our lives.

The unity we have as a congregation is to that we are a group of folks who agree on every issue, but the unity we have in Christ.

Or as one theologian put it this way, “The real unity of the church must not be organized, but exercised. Johannes Lilje

Sunday after Sunday we are reminded as we partake in the Eucharist, as we receive the Bread of Heaven, drink from the Cup of Salvation, we are reminded as we leave these doors that we are to leave this place and live Christ’s sacrificial love in our lives.

WILL WE ALWAYS DO THIS? No, of course not. If we could be faithful to God all the time we would not need Grace. So, don’t beat yourself up when at times you grow a few goat hairs on your chin. We all do. Ask for forgiveness, and move on.

And, just as God is quick & ever ready to offer forgiveness to us, so too must we be ready to do the same to someone who has acted like an “old goat” to you! People willing to forgive is one of the world’s greatest needs and sometimes it can prove to be one of the hardest things to give. But our Salvation and the world’s depends on it. And yet, it is little by little, in consistent gestures of kindness and works of mercy, the world is transformed.

And, more times than not, this faith-in-action is not evidenced in the moving of mountains, or the walking on water, or in the multi-million gift, but in what Wordsworth called “the best portion of a good person’s life: —their little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness & love.”

One last story that I think brings this point home, a warm, beach story to leave you with. It is a story told about the scientist and writer, LOREN EISELY.

Eisley was in the south of France, on the coast, attending a scientific symposium.

He woke early one morning and went for a walk on the beach before sunrise.

As he moved through the misty dawn he focused on a faint, far away figure.

It was a youth, bending and reaching and flinging his arms, seemingly dancing on the beach. Eisley thought, No doubt it’s a jogger, playing in the surf, celebrating the dawn of a new day. As he came nearer, he realized the youth was not dancing at all, but rather was bending to sift through the debris left by the night tide, stopping now and then to pick up a starfish and then, standing, heaving it back into the sea. He asked the youth the purpose of the effort. “The tide washes the starfish on to the beach and they cannot return to the sea by themselves.”, the youth replied. “When the sun rises they will die and the people come from town to pick them and sell them in the market place. I throw them back to the sea so that they might live another day.”

As the youth explained, Eisley surveyed the vast expanse of the beach, stretching in both directions beyond his sight. Starfish littered the shore in numbers beyond calculation. The youth’s plan seemed hopeless. “But there are more starfish on this beach than you can ever save before the sun is up. Surely you cannot expect to make

a difference?”, said Eisley. The youth paused to consider Eisley’s words, then bent to pick up a starfish, whirled around and threw it as far as possible out into the sea. Turning to the scientist he said simply, “MADE A DIFFERENCE TO THAT ONE!”

Our lives are tied together – and it is the grace of God working through you that makes all the difference.

Amen.