

Sermon for Sunday, May 3, 2009

Fourth Sunday of Easter

By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson	Acts 4:5-12
Psalm	23
Second Lesson	1 John 3:16-24
Gospel	John 10:11-18

Does anyone know what Sunday this is?

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. You're all familiar with the image: a smiling Jesus sitting under a tree, with a cute little lamb on his lap. Or maybe the one with Jesus standing, staff in hand, with the lamb across his shoulders. It's a beautiful image. It's a *safe* image. And it's a true image; but it's a very incomplete image. To understand what Jesus was getting at, you have to know the context. To whom was Jesus speaking when he called himself the Good Shepherd? And what did it mean to *them*?

First, Jesus was not talking to his followers. He was addressing the Pharisees. They were accusing him of being from the devil because he healed a blind man on the Sabbath. His response was that he was the Good Shepherd, not like the hired hands who collected their pay for watching the sheep, but abandoned them in their time of need, because they didn't really care for the sheep.

Now for thousands of years, the Jewish people had used the Good Shepherd image for God. It goes all the way back to Genesis 49:24, which says that Joseph was saved "By the power of the mighty one of Jacob, by the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, the God of your father ...". Such imagery was used by Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zechariah, and of course by David in his Psalms. Psalm 80 begins "Shepherd of Israel, listen, guide of the flock of Joseph, from your throne upon the cherubim, reveal yourself ...". And who can forget Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

So the Pharisees knew *exactly* what Jesus meant — he was claiming to be God. They also knew he was contrasting himself to them — the hired hands entrusted to care for God's people, but caring only for themselves. The Pharisees came in for a lot of abuse at the lips of Jesus. It wasn't that they were particularly bad people. By most standards they were very *good* people. But they had gotten legalistic, and had lost sight of the spirit of Judaism. I've been told that can even happen to Christian churches.

In this context of a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, the Gospel fits right in with the other two readings. In Acts, Peter and the other apostles were

called on the carpet for healing a cripple. (They got in trouble the same way Jesus did, by doing good. Maybe more of us should get ourselves in trouble like that.) Peter answers his accusers by chastising them. "Leaders of the people, elders! We heal in the name of Jesus, whom you crucified ... the stone rejected by you the builders which has become the cornerstone." And in John's letter, he points out that the world does not recognize *them* because it never recognized Jesus.

Because of the common theme running through these readings (the gross failure of the religious leaders of the day), I like to call this "anti-establishment Sunday" ... or maybe "blind fools Sunday," because that's what Jesus called the Pharisees. He warned the people not to follow the example of the Pharisees. Instead, he offered them someone else to follow — the Good Shepherd.

The shepherd image comes up again after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus and his apostles had just finished a breakfast of fish and bread on the shore of Lake Tiberius, when Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord. You know I love you." Then Jesus said, "Herd my sheep." ... What? Did I say something wrong? Jesus didn't say, "Herd my sheep."? Well, what did he say? "Feed my sheep!" Yes, there *is* a difference, isn't there?

A second time, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" And a second time Peter answered, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you!" And Jesus said, "Drive my sheep." ... What? He didn't say that either? Oh, right. He said, "Look after my sheep. Tend my sheep."

Then yet a third time, Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. By this time, Peter was getting really miffed. Let's face it, he was hurt that Jesus asked him the same question three times. But the gospels report he merely said, "Lord, you know everything. You know I love you." Then Jesus said, "Keep my sheep in line, and for goodness sake, make sure none of them have any fun!" ... Are you telling me he didn't say that either? Alright, what did he say? "Feed my sheep." ... That's it? "Feed my sheep"? You're sure there's nothing in there about keeping them in line? Well, what have all us successors of Peter been doing all these years? You mean my job is not to keep you on the straight and narrow? Boy, is this going to come as a shock to some of the pastors I know!

"Feed my sheep." That sounds like the job of a ... of a ... of a *servant!* Is that what we're supposed to be — servants? ... You bet! That's *exactly* what we're supposed to be. That's why Jesus washed the feet of his apostles — to set an example of ministry for the shepherds that would come after him. You know, we do that on Maundy Thursday. But Jesus wasn't talking about once-a-year symbolism. He was talking about every-day down-and-dirty ministry.

A shepherd in Jesus' days didn't walk behind the flock beating them with a stick to keep them moving. He walked in front of them, seeking out a safe path to food

and water and shelter. The sheep followed him, because they recognized his voice, and they trusted him. Jesus tells us that's the kind of Good Shepherd he is. He leads, and we follow.

That's the way it is with us, followers of Jesus, members of his flock. We are all called to have a little shepherd in us as well. If one of us falls, the rest of us stop and pick him up and put him on our shoulders. If one of us strays, the rest call out and point the way (as best we know it). But we don't follow each other. Together, we follow Jesus, for there is but one flock, and one Shepherd.

Amen. ...