

Sermon preached by
The Reverend William J. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
on April 22, 2018, The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B

Today's Gospel reading sets before us the familiar and beloved image of Christ the Good Shepherd. We have seen it in stained glass windows, in our childhood's Sunday School materials, and in many a religious painting. The Good Shepherd is a beloved image because it expresses in a heart-warming way an abundance of very good news. Christ the Good Shepherd speaks to us of a God who both knows us personally and loves us dearly like a faithful shepherd knows his sheep by name and is ready to risk his life for the sheep's safety. What a comfort, what peace there is in believing that God so knows and loves each one of us.

But there is another side to the Christ the Good Shepherd image that we often overlook. Sheep do not just belong to their shepherd, they belong to a flock. When we say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want; he makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters," it is all too easy to forget that shepherds are engaged in taking care of numbers of sheep, not just one. To be a sheep in a shepherd's care is, therefore, a group experience, not a solitary experience. In fact it is an important part of a shepherd's responsibility to keep a sharp eye out for sheep wandering off by themselves in order to bring them back to the flock. To be sure, a good shepherd watches out for every individual sheep and will leave the ninety and nine in the sheepfold to go out and rescue the one who has gone astray. But when the shepherd has found the one lost sheep, the shepherd brings the sheep home to join the rest of the flock. It is in the flock where every sheep belongs and where the sheep are safe.

It is this business of belonging to a flock that gives us human sheep trouble. To have Jesus as our personal shepherd is attractive and comforting. To be lumped together in a community of other folks is not so attractive and, in fact, makes some people run in the opposite direction. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the United States. Religious opinion polls show that of the significant number of Americans who profess belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, only a small percentage believe that it is important to belong to a congregation of like-minded believers. For most Americans Christian belief and church membership do not go hand in hand. There are even folks who call themselves "home Baptists," firm in their Baptist beliefs and also firm in never darkening the door of a Baptist church. I wonder why this is so. Perhaps non-joining is a product of the protestant emphasis on personal faith carried to its extreme. Perhaps non-joining is an expression of the American cult of rugged individuals and the pioneer spirit. "Don't fence me in!" Flight from church membership may also simply be the result of disappointing experience within churches. Christians, God knows are not always pleasant – or paragons of holy living. The other sheep sometimes get on our nerves.

Nonetheless, today's Gospel reminds us that if we are sheep who belong to the Good Shepherd, together, we belong to the Good Shepherd's flock. Christian belief is a community experience and not just a personal experience. If we have any doubt about that we have only to look at the model of prayer that Jesus gave us. Although we often say it alone as individuals, it is a corporate and not a personal prayer. We pray "Our Father... give us our daily bread ... lead us ... forgive us ... deliver us." And look at the key metaphors. If God is our Father and we are God's children, then we are members together of

one family. If we pray for the coming of God's Kingdom, then we are fellow citizens with a common allegiance.

It is clear from the Acts of the Apostles that the early Church took their community very seriously. We are told that "the company of those that believed were of one heart and soul." They met together frequently to pray and read the Scriptures, to share their stories of encounters with the Risen Christ, and to eat together as Jesus had bid them do. The Christian faith was born and was nurtured in such community.

And isn't that our experience as well? I know that I owe my faith to my parents, grandparents, and Sunday School teachers who loved me and shared with me the Gospel stories that meant so much to them. It has been through the witness of many Christian people whose lives have touched mine, including many of you who have shared your faith and your doubts with me, that my faith has grown and been renewed over the years. I would not be the Christian I am today without these people of God whose words and example have blessed my life.

The kind of Christian community that we read about in the Acts of the Apostles and the kind of Christian community that has blessed my life and I trust has blessed yours is very different from the kind of church that is merely an institution. The Church as institution exists as a purveyor of religious services to individual members. These members come to the church from time to time as their busy schedules allow and needs require, to be inspired, consoled, advised, taught, and to have milestone events blessed by the clergy – in other words, to be hatched, matched, and dispatched. In return, the members agree to pay dues for the upkeep of the institution so that it can continue to provide them with services when needed and to act on their behalf in doing various good works.

However, the flock to which Christ calls us is not an institution like that, but a community. A community is a place where people share their joys and sorrows, their hopes and their fears, their faith and their doubts and are known and loved with their strengths and their weaknesses, their virtues and their foibles. A community is a place where people get involved, feel ownership, take responsibility, wonder about the future, dream dreams, disagree, sometimes hurt each other, but always seek reconciliation. In short, a community is where we belong. Christ, the Good Shepherd of the flock, intends St. John's, West Hartford, and the Church everywhere to be a community like that.

The community of the Church of Christ is in fact a model of God's plan for the unity of us all. In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also ... so there shall be one flock, one shepherd. Jesus has in mind a much larger community than a local congregation. Just imagine what an impact the churches in West Hartford might have if, with all our differences, we still worked together as one. What if, for example, there were a united youth program for all the town run by all the congregations? What a strong and convincing witness that would be. Christ's mission as the Good Shepherd extends beyond the Church to the wider world. So today it is fitting that we join people around the country and around the world in celebrating Earth Day, holding up our common concern for the welfare of the whole planet that God has entrusted into our care. And here at St. John's, we are getting ready to plant our community garden and grow vegetables to share with neighbors who have limited access to fresh produce. We will be undertaking this project with our friends next door at Congregation Beth Israel. Surely the Good Shepherd whose care embraces sheep of all folds will bless our labors.

So let me leave you with a question: Why are you here this morning? You could be relaxing at home with another cup of coffee and the Sunday papers. After that you could read the Bible all on your own and say your prayers in the comfort of your living room. Yet here you are at St. John's. Why is that? Perhaps you are drawn by force of habit. Perhaps you are drawn in hopes of hearing something about God that will give you renewed vision and hope. But I suspect the deeper reason why we are all here is that we know that it is in the company of other Christian people that we are most likely to encounter Christ, the Holy One who lives not just in the Bible but in the here and now. It is when the flock gathers that we are most likely to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls us each by name and invites us to join God's mission of restoring our broken world to wholeness.