

Fourth Sunday of Easter

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.

Text: John 10:11-18

May 3, 2009

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

"Savior of the Sheep"

When I was a chaplain at "Baptist Hospital" in Pensacola Florida, there was a young man who had a serious motorcycle accident. He had lost control of the cycle and was thrown from it. He received serious injuries and required extensive skin grafts. The accident occurred because a rabbit ran across the road and he tried to dodge it. He succeeded in avoiding the Rabbit, but at the high cost of seriously injuring himself. When one of the nurses commented to him how it was unfortunate that such extensive injuries be inflicted on him because of a rabbit, he responded with satisfaction, saying: "Well, at least I didn't hurt that little fuzzy fellow."

It seems kind of silly. Most of us would think that the life of a rabbit would not be worth driving off the road and sustaining serious injuries. For this motorcycle driver to try and make this terrible accident into a noble sacrifice by saying it was for the sake of the life of a rabbit, makes it seem even more ridiculous. It would seem that the rabbit was not worthy of the human pain that resulted from saving it.

If you just glance at today's bulletin, you can't help but notice the theme of the day. The hymns as The King of Love My Shepherd Is, The Lord's My Shepherd, My Shepherd, You Supply My Need, Have No Fear Little Flock, Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us, and the Gospel starts out by saying, "I am the Good Shepherd." The 4th Sunday of Easter is referred to as "Good Shepherd Sunday".

I couldn't help but think back on this patient from my hospital chaplain days when I began reflecting on the meaning of the Good Shepherd. Rabbits and Sheep have some similar characteristics. Both are fuzzy, passive, relatively defenseless and of limited intelligence. I know that rabbits like to eat tulips. I'm not too sure about sheep. But both of these animals seem to be humble rather than "dignified" creatures. They're referred to as "cute" but not really "Awe inspiring". Yet Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. We might be tempted to say that a man who would lay down his life for some sheep, is not a Good Shepherd, but rather a foolish shepherd. Foolish like the hospitalized rabbit savior. Why should a shepherd, or anyone, be expected to make the ultimate sacrifice of giving their life, for something that is not worth much more than a rabbit?

Another incident at the hospital where I was a chaplain involved a mother who died in the process of saving her ten year old little boy who was drowning. Although saddened by her death, she had the admiration of her entire family as well as the hospital staff, for her sacrifice. Then there was a young man who was dead on arrival at the emergency room. He was stabbed to death because he refused to give over a Five Dollar Bill to a thief. There wasn't as much admiration for this sacrifice.

Sometimes we have good reasons to wonder about someone's priorities and just what is worth dying for. In the Mishnah, an ancient commentary on the Old Testament Law, the legal responsibility of a Shepherd is given. "If one wolf attacks the sheep, the shepherd is required to defend the flock. But if two wolves attack, the shepherd is considered to be blameless and the damage to the flock is viewed as unavoidable." In other words, the shepherd does not have to give his life to be considered a good and responsible shepherd. But according to Jesus, the good shepherd gives without limits. To give your life for sheep? That sounds like a bad deal for a Good Shepherd.

Some of you know I like to travel. When I was visiting Germany, I was amazed at how even the smallest little town would have a huge Cathedral in it. There is a church steeple in the city of Woeden that has a carved figure of a lamb on the top of it. It was placed there to remind the people of the most important role the Good Shepherd played for the sheep. It was placed there to commemorate the remarkable escape from death by one of the workmen who fell from the high scaffolding when the steeple was being built. The men working with him were in shock when they saw him fall. When they rushed down from the scaffolding to the ground, they found their fellow workman unharmed. At the same time when he fell, some sheep in the adjoining field were grazing along side of the church. He had fallen on one of the lambs which was crushed to death. The carved figure on top of the steeple was to commemorate that incident, but more important, it was to serve as a reminder of the Lamb of God who died to save each one of us!

That lamb had no choice in saving the workman's life. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, did have a choice. Just as the Shepherd uses a staff to save his sheep from danger, our Good Shepherd used the cross to save us from the danger of death. "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." That is the job of a Good Shepherd, to save the sheep from danger and death.

Our Gospel lesson tells us that as the Good Shepherd, Jesus has a specific job to do. He points out how someone who is hired to care for the sheep won't care for them in the same way. "He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own, the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he IS a hireling and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. And there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

In the closing hymn today written by Dorothy Thrupp, there is a line which reads: "Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus, you have bought us, we are yours." We are his because that snarling wolf known as sin was ready to devour us. Jesus battled that wolf on the cross and at the cost of his own life saved God's flock.

We are fortunate to be a part of that flock. But Jesus tells us: I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. And there shall be one flock and one shepherd." We accept too easily the historic divisions that separate the sheep in God's flock. These divisions are a part of our sinfulness. The Christian Church has allowed things such as the Ordination of Women, Baptism by Sprinkling or Immersion, whether or not clergy should be allowed to marry, does the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ before or after it is consumed? Now there seems to be a debate on whether or not to fully include people of differing sexualities. These and many other petty differences, scatter the flock of the Good Shepherd.

Jesus said that there shall be one flock and one shepherd. But looking at the present day Christian Church, it appears that there are several flocks being led by the one shepherd. Actually, there is only one flock. It is made up of those of any denomination who repent of their sins and truly believe in Christ as their Lord and Savior. But this unity is difficult to see because of the brokenness of the visible Church.

However, the Church can be compared to what is known as a: "South Pacific Archipelago" This is a necklace of tiny islands that break on the surface of the ocean. They look entirely separate on the surface, but underneath they are all joined together as part of a long, submerged, coral reef. You can't see the unity on the surface, but it is there.

We look at the difference denominations of Christianity and on the surface they all look separate. Some use a liturgy while others seem to have no formal structure. Some have clergy who wear robes or vestments while others are just as comfortable leading worship in a business suit. Some confess two Sacraments, some five, and yet others seven. Some recite the ancient creeds of the Church Fathers like the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, while others simply use a "Statement of Faith". It sure does look like there are many flocks being led by one shepherd. But Jesus said that there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

Beneath the surface there is only one flock since each flock is led by the one shepherd. While we might be tempted to think our flock is better than their flock, we should remember that none of us was worth having the shepherd give up his life for us, and yet Jesus did!

There is a question that most parents seem to ask their children. My mother asked it of me. I know her Father asked it of her. Mothers and Fathers in this congregation ask it of their children. The child returns home from school or Sunday School and sooner or later the question is asked: "What did you learn today?" Most kids hate to be asked that question. They usually respond by saying - "nothing!" But it seems like a fair question. One that can be asked not only of children, but of each one of us. At the end of the day, the end of a week, the end of a work period, at the end of any of the several stages of life's transitions, it seems fair to ask, "What did you learn?"

If after reflecting on Jesus as the Good Shepherd you ask yourself, "What did I learn?", we have learned of the love the father has given us, and that we should be called children of God. We are all members of one flock being led by one shepherd, the Good Shepherd in Jesus Christ. "Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus, you have bought us, we are yours." The Good Shepherd bought us by laying down his life for us. He continues to lead us in the paths of righteousness. It's up to us to follow the shepherd and not be tempted to go astray. Why would a shepherd give up his life for such stupid sheep? Simply because he loves us. Amen