

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER April 25, 2010 C

Acts 9:36-43
John 10:22-30

Today is traditionally known as “Good Shepherd” Sunday. The image of Jesus as a good shepherd is an ancient one in the church. And while we live in a time and culture where the practices of shepherding are not part of the landscape of our lives, Psalm 23 continues to be perhaps the best known and most beloved psalm in the Bible.

There’s much discussion among clergy these days as to whether or not the Biblical image of shepherd and sheep, used extensively to describe the relationship between God and God’s people, is a good contemporary metaphor. Sheep, after all, are stupid. They’re easily led. And they’re influenced by a herd mentality – and can easily panic when frightened. It’s not a very flattering description of a congregation – and besides, it simply isn’t true. Certainly not of our ‘flock’ here at St. Paul’s! So what meaning can we find in the words of Jesus in today’s gospel, where he says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.”

It’s not the characteristics of the sheep but the relationship with the shepherd which really matters. The sheep can’t make it on its own. The sheep not only need the shepherd, the sheep depend on the shepherd and trust the shepherd to lead and guide the way. In Jesus, the Good Shepherd, we see the image of a God who cares for us, a mentor who models for us how we are to be in relationship one with another, especially as members of the church.

I’m reminded on this Good Shepherd Sunday of my first year here in 2006 when I joined Bishop Daniel and the clergy of our diocese at St. Stephen’s in Goldsboro for the annual renewal of ordination vows. It’s an event which happens each year right before Easter – a low-key but sobering service in which we who are ordained to serve God’s people, renew our commitment to the Good Shepherd. We promise to be faithful pastors to all whom we are called to serve in building up the family of God. Bishop Daniel shared some things in his message to us clergy that year about shepherding the flock of Christ. They’re helpful hints, or tips, which don’t just apply to us clergy. It’s good advice for all of us as baptized members of the church, because we are all called to share in Christ’s ministry of shepherding others.

Authenticity, passion and community were three of the qualities found in the life of the Good Shepherd Bishop Daniel encouraged us clergy to emulate. These are qualities important to our own life and calling as members of the living Christ.

First, **authenticity**: Be real. Be genuine. If you want to hear the authentic voice of the Good Shepherd, speak with your authentic voice. If you want to know if you are speaking with authenticity, ask your spouse or partner or a real close friend. Trouble begins when we take ourselves or the roles we have (or would like to have) all too seriously, and we start acting in a way where our true and genuine self just doesn't come through to others. Be authentic. God will do the rest.

Second, **passion**: What stirs our hearts to do what we do, especially when it comes to others? There's something about experiencing people with passion for what they do that touches us, that moves us, that inspires us. There are countless examples of this in our parish family. Let me just illustrate a few. 1. We've having the blessing of 'prayer shawls' at the 8 and 10:30 services. This is an initiative of a small but passionate group of women who gather together regularly to knit what becomes a special gift to those who are sick or homebound, as well as those who are going into the hospital or having a baby. Much love and care go into what they do. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, becomes present through their good works. 2. Throughout the school year we have many folks who volunteer their time to cook our Wednesday night dinners. They do a fabulous job nourishing our bodies as well as our spirits – and, at the end of the meal, something happens which isn't always obvious to many and it is that we have a small but faithful band of volunteers who wash dishes week after week after week because their passion and commitment keeps our environment green by our using less paper and plastic products. And for those who have eyes to see, they witness in a concrete way to the church's commitment to challenge us to examine some of the patterns of our lifestyle. 3. Another of the many examples of passion I witness is while passing along the hallway on Wednesday evenings as Andrew Scanlon leads our choir in their weekly practice. I can't help but smile as I hear him talking to the choir. He's passionate about liturgy and music and it shows. It's good energy. And it's contagious! 4. There are many, many other examples I can give but will give just one more, which comes from this past Tuesday evening's Vestry Meeting. Tony Breuer gave a very passionate report to the vestry and rector from a strategic planning perspective, challenging us to seize the moment, moving toward some actionable steps which can network our members and build a stronger sense of community involvement and participation. Because of the extraordinary groundwork Tony has done so intensely on behalf of our parish family, the vestry wisely postponed today's parish meeting and instead, will meet among themselves this week as a necessary step before bringing the community together in the not too distant future.

Living into your passion is part of your authenticity – and it becomes one of the ways our life as a church grows in living out our vision and mission.

Where is your passion? And how do you express it in response to the voice of the Good Shepherd? The gift of our faith is first and foremost an invitation to be in a passionate relationship with Christ. Remember it. Renew it. Build on it. Grow in it.

Third, **community**: Our vocation as baptized members of Christ is never static. Our sense of calling is either growing or it's dying. And if it's growing, one is drawn ever deeper into community. The Good Shepherd is always in relationship. The God we serve is dynamic and communal. It's why the mystery of the communion of persons we call the Blessed Trinity is at the core of our faith in God and our membership in the church. As our patron Paul says, "No part of the body can say to another, I have no need of you."

Tabitha (also known as Dorcas), the woman we meet in our first reading is a good example of living with authenticity and passion within a community of Christ's disciples. Her compassionate care for her sisters and brothers was expressed through her good works and acts of charity, particularly as a seamstress who made clothes for many people. The love and gratitude felt by Peter and all the widows in the community who gathered at Tabitha's bedside is palpably described by the author of the Acts of the Apostles. It's a story not so much about Peter raising a woman from the dead as much as it is an example of how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is risen, present and at work through the power of the Spirit in the life of the church. This same risen Lord is present and at work in the life of our parish family today through the witness of others who teach us and strengthen us and even at times raise us up to new life when stress and conflict and unexpected events press in and trouble has us down.

Shepherding a flock isn't easy. But then again, it's really not about us clergy who renew our vow each Easter season to faithfully pastor the flock entrusted to our care. It's about our Shepherd, Jesus, and whether or not we as a flock recognize and listen to his voice. It's about us as a church and whether or not we trust the Good Shepherd to lead us into pastures often not of our choosing. It's why we need to stay close to the Good Shepherd. It's why we need to be authentic and passionate with one another in our life together as a community. For we are all called to share in his shepherding mission in our world today. May we pray for this grace on this "Good Shepherd" Sunday.

Bob Hudak
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Greenville, NC

www.stpaulsepiscopal.com