

Easter 4, Year A
April 13, 2008

RCL
Acts 2;42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

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“I am the gate for the sheep,” says Jesus. “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

Each year in Eastertide we read a part of the 10th chapter of the gospel of John, wherein Jesus describes himself as the shepherd of the sheep. We get a different piece of it in each of the three years in our lectionary cycle. Year A gives us this one about the importance of entering the sheepfold by the gate, and Jesus identifying himself as both shepherd and gate.

It’s a comforting image, to be the sheep who are led and nurtured by him, and in our worship we sing the hymns that tell of it and say the well-known 23rd Psalm. Our Sunday School is based on this imagery and it delights us to have our children grow up knowing they are guided by the shepherd and that he loves them.

Even though we no longer have shepherds as part of our everyday experience, it’s hard to imagine a modern parallel that works as well. The professional dog walker, maybe, who cares for the pets. But they must, of course, be kept on leashes so they can’t be said to choose their walker or to follow his or her voice. Zookeepers and monkeys, perhaps, but, again, our experience is of the animals in cages and so they have no freedom to choose.

In the end, I think, nothing quite matches the shepherd and the sheep as a picture of our relationship to Jesus and his to us.

But let’s make sure we understand enough about shepherds and sheep to know what Jesus is talking about and let’s not allow this model be a distant, impersonal, stained-glass one. Let’s do whatever we can to make the sheepfold a current and vital example of living in community with each other in the way Jesus wants us to, under his watchful eye and constant presence. He is, after all, the shepherd, the one whose voice we will follow first and always.

So here’s a down-to-earth, practical bit of information about sheep and shepherds in Jesus’ time, in case you didn’t know, that helps in understanding today’s reading: At night shepherds would herd all their sheep together into a common enclosure for rest. The shepherds would take turns sleeping across the entrance to the sheepfold, to keep predators out and the sheep in. In effect, they were themselves the gate. In the morning they would call their own flock with a shout or a song or a tune on the pipe and the sheep would follow their own shepherd because they knew the sound of his voice. It’s natural for sheep to follow their own shepherd. But not all shepherds form a reliable gate.

Jesus does. He offers protection for those who follow him by blocking danger from entering, and he shows his sheep the way in, by the right door, the door that offers them a secure life in his sight. All the sheep that want to enter, to be with him, are welcome.

This all-inclusive sheepfold is the community for which Jesus gave us his life. “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” It was the model for the early church, which we read about this morning from the book of Acts. They truly shared a common life together. They sold their possessions for the good of all and contributed to each other’s needs. They worshiped and broke bread and worked together. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. All those who were being saved.

One thing that’s clear about the sheepfold, and the early church, is that the sheep did not choose each other. They did not let in only their friends and other sheep who made them comfortable. The shepherd and his father chose the sheep and all who wanted to come in were included.

No doubt you saw the article in the Plain Dealer this week about the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio, suing five breakaway parishes for their property. I’d like to be sure you understand what is happening at this point. Unfortunately, reporters seem to always look for the most incendiary comments to print and that leaves us with partial truths.

Bp Hollingsworth has long been in negotiations with the rectors of the five parishes who led their vestries to vote, some months ago, to separate from our Diocese and attach themselves to a diocese of the Anglican Communion in one of the countries of the global south. This they did after the Diocese of New Hampshire elected a bishop who is a gay man living with his lifelong partner, and when his election was ratified by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

And that continues to be the issue for the folks who remain in these five parishes, and for their leaders, who now call their churches Anglican instead of Episcopal. The rectors have all left the Episcopal Church but the parishes continue to meet in and to use the parish property.

Let me refer, for a moment, to the canons of our church. These are the ecclesiastical laws under which we live and move and have our being. Title 2, Canon 1 is entitled “Of Parishes” and Section 1 reads as follows:

“Parishes are constituent parts of the Diocese of Ohio. Each Parish shall make provision in its By-Laws or Articles of Incorporation acknowledging its accession to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the Episcopal Church and to the canons of General Convention and of the Diocese of Ohio. As provided in the canons of General Convention, parishes hold title to all real and other property in their care and custody in trust for the Diocese.”

In other words, we hold this property in trust for the Diocese of Ohio. If we were to decide, for example, that we would like to add snake handling to our worship and to discontinue the weekly services we have now, thereby separating ourselves from the doctrine, discipline, and worship of the Episcopal Church, we would not

be allowed, by church law, to continue to use this building and we'd have to go over to Ray's house to hold our Sunday services.

To read this canon is to remember what Jesus teaches us about possessions, too, that we have them in trust from God. All that we have is his. And that we share them with the others in our community. This is not our church, it is God's church. This is not our table, but Christ's table.

We remember too that we benefit from the sacrifices of those who have come before us as members of this community, those who built this church, and who made positive contributions here so that the Spirit of God might touch people in this place, so that it might be like a genuine sheepfold of which Jesus is the only gate. We are responsible to them in holding these possessions, as well as to those who will come after us.

The Bishop of the Diocese of Ohio, after lengthy conversations with those who have left the Episcopal Church, has decided to let the civil courts decide who is entitled to the property they continue to occupy. That means filing law suits. We wait to see how that will turn out, whether the civil court will give credence to our church laws or not. In other places across the country the Episcopal Church has won court cases like this one.

I want you to know that the intent on the part of the bishop is not to "do damage" to these breakaway parishes, as one quoted in the article would like the reader to believe. The divisiveness of the leadership of those parishes has already done that.

We follow a shepherd who allows every sheep into the sheepfold, every person who desires to follow him into the community. We do not choose who will be in community with us. Only the shepherd chooses.

Those who would draw a circle of inclusion around themselves alone form another kind of community, one with qualifications created by human beings, and I leave it to you to decide if this is the kind of sheepfold you believe Jesus intends for us to live in.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly," Jesus says. I pray that we, living in community here at All Saints, welcoming all, talking about our differences in good faith, sharing our Lord's holy meal at his holy table, may discover again each day what it means to have life in Christ, and to have it abundantly. Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria