

Sermon for 4 Easter
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
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In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is in the middle of a conversation at the end of which people will try to stone him. He has healed a man born blind, and done it on the Sabbath. And so he gets embroiled in a drawn out cross-examination and quarrel between the healed man, his parents, and different factions of the Pharisees present. The healed man, who can now see believes in him and worships him, but some of the Pharisees are too proud to admit their blindness.

And that's where Jesus launches into this speech about the shepherd versus the thief. The real shepherd is recognized by the sheep. They know his voice. A middle eastern shepherd doesn't drive his sheep with dogs like we might. The dog is an unclean animal, for starters. Instead, the shepherd walks ahead of the sheep with a distinctive call or tune that the sheep will recognize and follow. Each flock has one shepherd, and the sheep know him. Because the shepherd remains the same, he knows and cares about the sheep. He can call each sheep by name, and the sheep know his call and his voice. There is a settled relationship between the sheep and the shepherd, and the sheep follow him because they know him.

At night, when the sheep are penned, there is an opening or entrance in the fence, so the shepherd lies down across the opening to sleep. The sheep know the shepherd and won't try to walk over him to get out. But anyone or anything that wants to get at the sheep will have to go through the shepherd. He lays himself down across the opening as the door to the sheep, both to keep them safely inside and to keep thieves and wolves out. His whole reason for being there is to keep the sheep alive, healthy, and well-cared for.

On the other hand, a human thief can be clever. He can climb into the sheepfold by another way. The sheep will then run away from him, because they don't know him. And then he does what thieves do. He is there to steal, kill, and destroy.

This is not a straight parable, with only one point. Neither is it a straightforward allegory, where every aspect of the story maps directly to one aspect of reality. Instead, Jesus is stringing together several images that his hearers would have understood about sheep and shepherding, in order to make several points. In this passage, Jesus is identified with two different things, and we are identified with two different things. And the images weave in and out of each other throughout the passage.

First of all, we are sheep. This is not a complimentary image. Let's talk about sheep. Sheep are dirty and smelly. And sheep are about the stupidest critters on the face of the earth. Trying to get a sheep to exhibit signs of intelligence is like trying to get a cat to heel. Sheep do not think for themselves. They just try to stay behind the next guy. The best thing you can say about a sheep is that it follows readily when called.

Alternatively, we can be thieves. The thief is one who refuses to submit to the proper order of relationships. He doesn't want to deal with the shepherd. He just wants the sheep for himself. The thief will not recognize the shepherd's authority or work with him for the welfare of the sheep. Instead, he will usurp the power of the shepherd without taking on any of the responsibility. He will simply use and discard the sheep to satisfy his own appetites.

Jesus, on the other hand, is the good shepherd. He's the one with the authority to take the sheep out. The gatekeeper opens to him when he comes. And the sheep that belong to him know him and follow him. He comes to give us abundant life.

As the good shepherd, Jesus is also the door. He lays down his life for the sheep, and protects them from harm. That doesn't mean that there will be no suffering. Our readings from Acts and I Peter show us that. But there is no ultimate harm to us if we follow the shepherd and allow him to constrain us in our ignorance. He will pen us up and keep us from wandering off into the night, where the wolves prowl. And whoever trusts in him and submits to his authority "will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." In other words, we will have whatever we need to truly live.

Following the good shepherd does not mean that we will get what we want. Remember, sheep are dumb. When I was a kid, we had a couple of sheep for a while in a wooded lot on my parents' property. But before we got the sheep, we had to walk every inch of that pasture, to make sure there was nothing there that was poisonous to sheep. You see, the sheep really like the things that will kill them. They'll eat them right up.

The good shepherd makes sure that the sheep don't have access to those things. If the sheep are just smart enough to know that those yummy things aren't there, they'll be annoyed. Especially if they can see them, and smell them, just outside the fence. But the way of the good shepherd will be life, not death. Even if the sheep are too dumb to know it. And the sheep that follow the good shepherd will have everything they need.

The difference between Jesus and us, in this passage, is that he is totally integrated while we have to make choices. As the shepherd and as the door, his purpose and practice are one and the same. It may take two different images here to capture the essence of who he is, but there is only one essence. We, on the other

hand, have to choose whether we will accept being sheep or whether we will be stupid sheep *and* thieves.

There is no way to escape being a sheep. But we can try. We can simply refuse to accept the fact that we are small and stupid and ignorant. We can deny that we have any need for a shepherd. We can simply assert ourselves and take what we want. We can use our selves and those around us to achieve our own self-defined ends. We can steal, kill, and destroy to satisfy our cravings. And we can congratulate ourselves that we are self-sufficient and our own masters. But we will still be sheep. We can eat those succulent plants that the shepherd would not let us have. And we can die.

Or we can be honest and come to terms with the fact that we are small and stupid and ignorant. And we can simply be good sheep. We can learn to know the shepherd's voice and come quickly when he calls us. We can stay inside the pen when the wolves howl, rather than running over the shepherd to join the wolves. We can accept the fact that some things are bad for us, even when they seem like so much fun. And we can learn to enjoy submitting ourselves to the shepherd's authority, trying to love him, since he loves us.

The result of this will be a joy that comes only from knowing and following the shepherd. If we submit to Jesus, we will eventually be able to say with King David, "Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."