

Following the Good Shepherd

Sermon preached at St. Peter's Cathedral in Helena, Montana

April 22, 2018

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning. It is great to be back with you after two Sundays. So much has happened. You have called a new Dean, The Rev. Scott Anderson who will be here at the beginning of June.

I want to thank Monica Berner and all who served on the search committee for their diligence, their commitment to hours of hard work and prayerful discernment which has now come to completion. A new chapter in your life together is about to begin as the Lord wishes the ministries of this place to flourish both as a parish and in its ministry with the diocese.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Easter. This is a particularly special Sunday for me, because I served as the rector of Church of the Good Shepherd in Lyndhurst, Ohio just east of Cleveland for 15 years. It was my first church as rector and the congregation was very patient raising me in the responsibilities of caring for a parish. I want to tell you a story of how a suburbanite like me managed to learn a few things about taking care of sheep on the first Christmas at Church of the Good Shepherd. I never dreamed of telling this story to a congregation with farmers in Montana, but I cannot resist the temptation.

Our church was very small, I was young and wanted to do something new and dramatic to advertise our church. We had an organist who had collected nativity scenes from all over the world. I proposed that we display a good number of our organist's nativity scenes in the parish hall and then advertise the display with a live nativity scene near the road by the entrance to the church!

Please understand, that I had no idea how to find, much less buy or rent animals for a live nativity scene near the busy road of our church. But a man in the church agreed to help, knew where he could purchase a donkey, a mother sheep and her two little lambs. He also agreed to build a stable and illuminate it with flood lights. We were in business!

We advertised in the local paper and finally the opening night arrived! The four animals were being kept in a garage with water and straw, but it was my job to bring the animals out to the stable on the road. Well, the donkey

was easy. I led him with a rope and he came along just fine. But the sheep were not so easy!

I went to the mother sheep. She was big! We're talking big and I thought I could bring her out to the stable as easily as the donkey, but I was wrong! The mama would not move. And I started to get desperate because, the whole world was waiting for this show to go on. You see, this was one of my earliest lessons in leadership and caring for sheep!

The mama sheep would not move, so I made my first mistake! I tried to drag the sheep with the twine that was around her neck. It didn't work. She did not move. You don't drag the sheep.

Then I got another idea. I went behind here and tried to push the sheep! She did not move! You don't push sheep!

Then I got another idea. I tried to roll the sheep! That did not work either! So, I gave up on forcing the mama sheep to do what I wanted her to do and pick up one of the little lambs. And the second I walked toward the stable, carrying the lamb, the mother got up and followed.

This was Christmas, the time of celebrating the birth of our Lord when we read a passage from the prophet Isaiah, that 'a little child shall lead them.'

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." (Isaiah 11:6)

It was an early lesson in leadership, that you don't drag the sheep, you don't push them or roll them. You show them how to follow the Good Shepherd.

There was a story told about a professor from our seminary who gave a powerful sermon for one of his students at his ordination. He said to the ordinand, "The one thing that you have to remember, is that there is only one Good Shepherd and we are all sheep." Our ministries come from the Good Shepherd and the only way those ministries will flourish is if we remember to be guided and led by Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

That professor was trying to teach the young ordinand, that he was not the Good Shepherd, the bishop is not the Good Shepherd, the rector is not the Good Shepherd, the dean is not the Good Shepherd. We are all sheep who have a master and our job is to follow wherever the Good Shepherd calls us to go.

I want to say something about the similarities between sheep and people. Sheep spend a great deal of time looking down at the grass and eating.

They can become self-absorbed and turn into their own way, especially if they get hurt or wounded. People, like sheep can get lost, separated from the flock and go their own way.

The prophet Isaiah wrote about this in the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of his prophecy, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone into his own way, and the Lord has laid on him, the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:6)

Again, the important lesson to remember is that we all need the Good Shepherd. We need the Good shepherd to look out for us, to lead us and to guide us, or we turn into our own way and go astray. People, like sheep need a master to lead them and guide them. Otherwise, if we do not have a master, then we become our own master, and that will not end well.

I finish with a story, a personal witness, about how I was following the Good Shepherd, but I turned away from him and went astray. I got lost in my own way, and a wise bishop helped me to return to God.

I was in my first parish at the Church of the Good Shepherd. It was very small and the bishop wanted to close it. The parish had had only one rector, the founding rector who gathered the flock, later bought some land and then built a beautiful building. But over several years, the rector got tired and burned out. Finally, the congregation got him to leave. Because they were so small and on diocesan aid, they took a chance on calling my wife and me and our two-year old son. I was 29 years old and the saying then was, 'don't entrust your parish to anyone under 30!

So, we started. I had no idea what to do. Within a year or so, I was a broken young man. But in the midst of my brokenness, God broke through. I started to pray differently. I started to read scripture more intentionally and most importantly, I began to rely on the Lord, trusting that if you believed that Jesus was who he said he was, then he could be heard and followed, if we trusted him to guide us.

Over time, the parish began to change and to flourish. New people came, bringing their gifts and ministries. Children filled the Sunday School, while ministries to the community expanded. The buildings were refurbished and in my 11<sup>th</sup> year there, a large new building was built for education, fellowship and hosting diocesan youth conferences and cursillos.

But something happened to me that was not good. I was becoming 'the successful rector'. I started thinking that I deserved a bigger parish. I moved from being dependent on God to being rather full of myself. I moved from a sense of gratitude to God to a sense of entitlement. Then a very

wise bishop counselled me. He was at the parish for a renewal weekend and I asked to talk to him. I am not very proud of this incident, but he taught me one of the most important lessons of my life. I am not very proud of what I said to him, but it was something like, 'I have been in this parish for 13 years or so and it has grown to be a very vibrant parish. I think I deserve a bigger parish, but that has not happened. I was grumpy about feeling stuck in this parish and said to him that I thought life was unfair and that I was not getting what I deserved!'

The bishop was very kind, but very firm. He took me aside and said to me, "Graham, sometime, very soon, I want you to get down on your knees and thank God, that life is unfair! Sometime very soon. I want you to get down on your knees and thank God, that you have not gotten what you deserve. Because, you see, if life were fair, and we all got what we deserved, we would all be dead!...It is only because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we are alive. Now I want you to go back to that church and love your people like you first loved them. Go back and depend on God the way you learned to depend on him when you were first called there.

That bishop saved my life. He saved me from myself. I had become like a lost sheep who had turned into his own way. He returned me to the leading and the guiding of the Good Shepherd. I learned to trust him again.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, may we have a fresh appreciation for how each of us are sheep who know their need of God. When we hear his voice, may we know him who calls us each by name so that we may follow where he leads. Amen

The Very Rev. Graham Smith