

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, April 22, 2018 // Easter 4, Year B

The Gospel: John 10:11-18

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Background and general observations

The Fourth Sunday in the Easter season is known as "Good Shepherd Sunday." It might be interesting to ponder why the image of Jesus as Good Shepherd has been so important to Christians through the ages. It might also be interesting to ponder the Collect for the Day: "O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

Since neither shepherds nor sheep are part of our everyday experience, it can be helpful to recall some of the routine practices of shepherds in Jesus' day. One common practice was that of combining flocks at night, so that shepherds could take turns keeping watch for predators. In this way, shepherds who had worked all day could get some sleep without having to worry about the safety of their sheep. Then, in the morning, each shepherd could stand in a different part of the field surrounding the pen and call to his sheep with his distinctive voice. The sheep all knew the call or voice of their own shepherd and would follow the one who, they knew, kept them safe.

It is also interesting to note the difference between cattle herding and shepherding. Whereas cattle are often herded by "driving" them from behind on horseback, with whips and loud, threatening calls, sheep need to follow their shepherd. If the shepherd were to get behind the sheep and try to drive them like cattle, the sheep would all run to get around behind the shepherd. As some have pointed out, sheep don't need to be threatened and driven by whips and yells. Instead, sheep seem to think of their shepherd as one of them, as one of the family, so to speak.

Thus, we can see why the collect of the day for Good Shepherd Sunday is so appropriate—we pray that we may know the one who calls us (that is, recognize his voice or call), and we pray that we may follow where he leads (as opposed to being whipped and driven). With so many "voices" calling out to us each day, we might ask ourselves, how do we recognize the voice of God?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

Some have seen this portion of the lesson as indicating God's desire to draw all people to God. Jesus says elsewhere that when he is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. Jesus also

speaks in Luke's Gospel about the shepherd's willingness to leave 99 sheep in order to go after one sheep that is lost.

How does this strike you? Do you think of God as One who actively seeks you and wants to embrace all people? Or, do you think of God as One who passively waits for people to look for him?

2. Consider how the following story might illustrate or differ from the Gospel lesson:

Back when the telegraph was the fastest means of long-distance communication, there was a story, perhaps apocryphal, about a young man who applied for a job as a Morse code operator. Answering an ad in the newspaper, he went to the address that was listed. When he arrived, he entered a large, noisy office. In the background a telegraph clacked away. A sign on the receptionist's counter instructed job applicants to fill out a form and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office.

The young man completed his form and sat down with seven other waiting applicants. After a few minutes, the young man stood up, crossed the room to the door of the inner office, and walked right in. Naturally the other applicants perked up, wondering what was going on. Why had this man been so bold? They muttered among themselves that they hadn't heard any summons yet. They took more than a little satisfaction in assuming the young man who went into the office would be reprimanded for his presumption and summarily disqualified for the job.

Within a few minutes the young man emerged from the inner office escorted by the interviewer, who announced to the other applicants, "Thank you very much for coming, but the job has been filled by this young man."

The other applicants began grumbling to each other, and then one spoke up saying, "Wait a minute—I don't understand something. He was the last one to come in, and we never even got a chance to be interviewed. Yet he got the job. That's not fair."

The employer responded, "I'm sorry, but all the time you've been sitting here, the telegraph has been ticking out the following message in Morse code: 'If you understand this message, then come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it or understood it. This young man did. So the job is his."

Do you believe God is constantly calling to us? What can we do to cultivate an ability to recognize and understand God's call? What voices do you spend the most time listening to and attending to? Are you an expert in hearing and interpreting certain voices that are not of God?

With so many different voices calling to us daily, how do we discern those that are the most important, so that we can focus our attention there, instead of wasting our time on unimportant voices?

Continuing with the theme of voices or callings, which are the voices that give you life, and which are the voices that take life away from you? Can you discern the voice of the Good Shepherd in those voices, people, activities that put life into you (give you a sense of abundant life)? And can you discern the voice of the hired hand who might call to you and promise to lead you, but in the end will let you down and forsake you?

Have there been times in your life when you realized too late that you had been listening to and following a hired hand?

How can you tell the difference between a divine voice (or prompting, or call) and any other voices in your life? When is it that you are most likely to hear God's voice? What do you know of positioning yourself, and your life, so that you are most receptive to what is distinctly divine?

3. Jesus' use of shepherding is a compelling metaphor especially when we realize the particular behavior of these animals, their desire to walk with their shepherd. What do you think Jesus hopes to teach us? Are we people who need to be "driven" or threatened, whipped and prodded by God to go in the right direction, or are we people who need to listen and be attentive in order to follow God?

In thinking about your own spiritual journey, are you able to distinguish when you were walking with God or following God—in trust, by faith—and when you felt you were being prodded or whipped, perhaps in fear of punishment or abandonment?

4. It is helpful to remember that John's Gospel has several different "I am" sayings of Jesus. For example, "I am the Bread of Life," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the door or gate," "I am the vine, you are the branches," "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life".... So when Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd, we might surmise that this is just one more facet of his relationship to us. (It's worth noting that to say, "I *am* the Good Shepherd" is a very different assertion than to say "I am *like* the Good Shepherd.")

John is proclaiming Jesus as the incarnation of the eternal God, so it is not surprising that multiple symbols and metaphors are needed to tell us more completely who Jesus is. Some people find it helpful to ponder which images or metaphors are most meaningful or strike a chord. It might also be useful to spend some time with those metaphors that do not seem helpful at first. Could it be that these images communicate something about the nature of God and God's relationship to us that might expand our understanding of God and deepen our faith? What do you hear God saying to you about your relationship to God in these "I am" sayings?