

Sermon "Some Sheep . . . Some Shepherd"
Rev. Dr. Steven Peay
Sunday April 20, 1997

I've always enjoyed hearing stories about Winston Churchill, he was an interesting man. There are two I particularly like, one has nothing to do with today's sermon--the other does. You know it is reported that Mr. Churchill enjoyed a drink--no doubt to go along with his cigar--and one evening he'd enjoyed several. As he was leaving the party he encountered the rather prickly ember of Parliament Bessie Braddock who said to him, "Winston, you're drunk!!" To which he quickly replied, "Bessie you're ugly and the morning I shall be sober!" Once it was reported that Hitler had said he would wring England like a chicken's neck. Churchill's riposte, "Some chicken...some neck!" Churchill's words pounded into my head when I read the readings for today... "Some sheep...SOME shepherd."

It has often puzzled me why we cling, and with some of the greatest sentiment, to the sheep metaphors. After all, very few -- if any -- of us have ever really spent time with sheep. If we did, we'd discover that they can be pretty stupid...can be driven just about anywhere. If they wander off from the flock they're pretty much defenseless and resourceless. At times, however, they can be pretty stubborn, willful creatures; even though sheep become very dependent upon their shepherd. And, they stink. They certainly don't seem to be the metaphor of choice for the church in the waning days of the technological twentieth century. Still, "the Lord's my shepherd," speaks to most of us very deeply. Why?

We have to remember that the Bible was written in a pastoral culture...sheep herding was one of the main occupations. There are still places in the Middle East, Europe, even the United States where shepherds and sheep are part of the landscape. When Jesus described himself as the "Good Shepherd" his hearers' knew immediately what he was saying; the qualities of faithfulness, hard work, dedication, and self-giving he was describing. The hireling, the one who hired on for pay only, was not like the shepherd. He did his job, period. The good shepherd knew his sheep, named them, could recognize them individually and collectively, when he spoke they listened and followed. The sheep knew that the shepherd would defend them--to the death. When he applied this metaphor to himself and to us he spoke volumes.

This Good Shepherd, however, had come to an unruly flock. Almost from the beginning the flock of Israel wandered away from their God and the shepherds he sent to watch over them: Moses, the Law, the Prophets, the Kings. The Father, in his wisdom, sent his Son to serve as shepherd...and as lamb of sacrifice. Thus, Jesus puts a twist on the relationship between shepherd and sheep. The sheep had known the voice, had been called by name, but now they come to know not just the shepherd, but the flock's owner as well. Jesus says that he knows his sheep by name, as he knows the Father and is known by him. Later, when the Good Shepherd becomes the lamb of sacrifice, the world witnesses the truth of what Jesus declared--God's love is made real in a life laid down...and taken up again. The flock comes to know the Creator by name and is marked, transformed by that name.

The power of the name, just like the sheep/shepherd metaphor, is sometimes hard for us to understand in a day and time when almost everyone is on a first name basis. In the Middle East, to this day, one's full name is a closely guarded secret. If someone knows your name, then they have power over you. That's why it was so important to know the names of the gods...so you could control them. Remember when Moses encounters God in the burning bush he asks his name, all he gets back is? "I am who am." In the Hebrew alphabet this would become the holiest name of all, no vowel points were inserted in the consonants YHWH (the tetragramaton). When someone got to the Name he said "Adonai" (Lord). Later, scholars would try and translate, reconstruct the name coming up with 'Jehovah' and 'Yahweh.' Names which we can't be sure are real.

God's name spoke of pure being: "I am" or "He is." It invited the questions "what?" afterward. Jesus' use of a whole string of 'I am' sayings, including "I am the Good Shepherd," spoke of the name of God and the relationship he had with the Father. When Peter was challenged after healing the lame man in the temple, the authorities wanted to know "whose name" he did this in. Peter tells them...Jesus. In so doing he answers the question after the name, what?, who? The name is Jesus; this name gives a whole new cornerstone to reality. As never before, we can become familiar, intimate with the Lord of earth and heaven.

He goes onto add that "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." It is a statement which has been both compelling and controversial from the moment it was uttered. Compelling in that it drives us to make the name known to people, so that they might become known and experience "peace beyond human understanding." Controversial in that it has sometimes been used as a bludgeon to force faith, or as an excuse to develop a syncretistic system in which all the religions of the world can make nice.

We would do well to hear the words of Nicholas Lash, Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, in his most recent book *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'*. He writes,

"The European and North American thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not wrong to be suspicious of 'tradition-specific or "sectarian" religious discourse'. Nor was it dishonourable to seek, beyond the obscenity of violence perpetrated in the name of God, for reasoned peace. Their mistake lay in the expectation that the human grasp of truth could ever be other than tradition-constituted. We are not incapable, as human beings, of making sense of things, of speaking truth and acting with integrity. But all these things we do from somewhere, shaped by some set of memories and expectations, bearing some sense of duty borne and gifts that have been given. All sense, and truth, and goodness, are carried and constituted by some story, some pattern of experience, some tradition.

Nor are the traditions of narrative and devotion, of proclamation and repentance, of celebration and compassion, of speech and silence, of structure and slavery and liberation, that we call 'religions', an exception to this general rule. From which it follows that it is mistaken to suppose that religions may be confidently claimed to be 'just different ways of worshipping or contemplating the same Ultimate Reality. What is experienced as "Ultimate" is specific to the tradition concerned...Nor are religions just different paths to a same goal; they are different paths to different goals. The goal aimed at is as tradition-specific as the path taken. The goal is constituted as goal by the path chosen."

Lash's point is well-taken, the stories we tell, the traditions we hold onto come from deep within us. Christians may study, as have Lash and countless others, the stories of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, but the "Good Shepherd" speaks to us where WE are. Thus, we tell the stories of faith over-and-over again to as many as will listen. The story has driven missionaries, martyrs, healers, thinkers, preachers, and common people to heroic virtue -- all imitation of the Good Shepherd. We tell the story -- we don't condemn. We don't know the mind of God, save as He has revealed it to us. Jesus said, "I have other sheep and other sheepfolds." As Christians we just need to live the power of the name and leave the rest to God.

The Name and the story, however, are what unites us as Christian believers. The unruly sheep syndrome went from Israel into the church ... and pretty quickly. John's letter we read from was written to a faction-ridden community that needed to be reminded that it was love "in deed and truth" which makes the Christian -- not lip service to a set of doctrinal statements. We could spend hours exploring the disintegration of organic Christian unity starting in the New Testament, into the early Church, through the split between East and West in 1054, the Reformation, the rise of denominationalism, and the frantic development of the "ecumenical movement" of the past two hundred years. We won't.

Suffice it to say, "there is one flock and one shepherd."

Our unity does not exist because the sheep are identical -- they aren't; never have been, probably never will be. We have unity because of the Shepherd...we know his name and he knows ours. Unity comes not from the flock, but in knowing the Shepherd. We are all one in Christ because we are bathed in the same baptism, no matter when it happens, and eat from the same table, whether it's leavened or unleavened bread, grape juice or wine. We share the same story...we were lost and now we're found. We had no peace and now we do. If only we could come to understand that Biblical and historic Christian faith points us again and again to focus on the Shepherd and not ourselves; that unity doesn't mean uniformity; that our stories all converge in a God who acts in love and trust, we'd extend the right hand of fellowship and the Good Shepherd's name would be even more widely known.

Because of our autonomy, we Congregationalists are in about the best position to spread the story. All seekers, all believers are welcome in the midst of this Gathered People. Here love is shown in deeds, not just in words. That's why I don't lose hope...yes, we're some sheep alright, but He's some shepherd. Amen.