

St. Matthew's Church

NEW YORK CITY

ONE FLOCK AND ONE SHEPHERD

Acts 10:11-16

Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 3, 2009

The twentieth century has been a time when churches have talked together about their differences and similarities. There have been mergers and combinations, new opportunities for various Christian communities to worship and serve together, and new understandings of how each group lives out God's life given in Jesus. Although parts of this ecumenical movement have looked for one church on earth, it has mostly been a celebration of the great diversity of people, ministries, and styles of worship that belongs to the baptized.

The church about which Christ was speaking is not an organization (though it obviously has organized parts) but rather the entire company of those who own the Lord Jesus Christ as their Shepherd. Thus, the unity comes not from the fact that the sheep are all forced into one organization but in the fact that they have all heard Jesus and have left lesser loyalties to follow Him. Moreover, to the degree that they do follow Him there is also a visible (through not necessarily a structural) unity that follows.

This wonderful Gospel reading from John 10 reminds us of the life, and the care for that life, that we have in Jesus. The Gospel reading today raises questions about just who the sheep are. Christians have asked this question from the beginning of the Church.

With such a gospel that proclaims God's love for all the earth, it is understandably human to want to know exactly which of us belong to God's sheepfold. One of the hardest things in the world to unlearn is exclusiveness. Restrictions have been placed on us and rules made. People have claimed power for themselves in ways that excluded others from receiving the sacrament, from being buried in the consecrated ground, even from being

part of their own families if their views were different. We have in our time through the ecumenical movement moved away from much of this. But still people want to know who is in and who is out, and still boundaries are set that keep out those whom we think should not be included.

The divisions between Christians seem to be not so much denominational as categorical: conservative, moderate, or liberal; biblical literalist or historical critic; pro-life or pro-choice; law-bound or grace-centered. Whatever may divide us in our time or in times past, the human tendency toward an exclusive claim on God's life is prevalent. This makes us wary of one another and unable to hear what Jesus has to say to us and through us to all the earth about God's salvation.

The Shepherd's Heart for His Sheep: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd: I know my sheep and my sheep know me; just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:11-15). In Matthew 9:36 we read about Jesus having compassion because he saw his sheep scattered and cast down. The word translated "compassion" there conveys the idea that He felt it in His stomach. His stomach turned with compassion. Our Lord is no hireling, like some shepherds who come to us today. His heart was full of sacrificial love. Notice that four times Scripture says Christ laid down His life for the sheep; the last part of verse 11; "The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep"; the last part of verse 15; "I lay down my life for the sheep": the last part of verse 17; "I lay down my life, only to take it up again." And in verse 18; "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again." This is like a refrain from the Lord's own personal song with each stanza ending: "I lay down my life for my sheep." Such is the good Shepherd's heart.

Jesus the Good Shepherd: Jesus says He is the one who calls the sheep and the sheep know His voice. It is like what happens when a parent, looking for a child in the crowded place, simply calls out the child's name and is heard by the child despite all the other noise. Jesus' voice is known to the sheep. Jesus says; "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." Jesus also reminds the Jews of his time and those of us who are the

church in our time; “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 and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Spurgeon once wrote on this theme, “Our Shepherd-King has greater thoughts than the most large-hearted of his servants. He delights to enlarge the area of our love.” Paul records in Acts 18 an occasion at Corinth, having come there from a not-too-successful preaching mission in Athens. Moreover, he had just experienced opposition from the Jewish population in Corinth. No doubt Paul was somewhat discouraged at this point. But here in Corinth, at this very point in his ministry, the Lord appeared to him by night in a vision and said; “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10). Many people! What a comfort that must have been to Paul and how bold he must have been as he set out to find these sheep who belonged to the flock of the Great Shepherd.

Jesus’ words about who the sheep are come in the context of one overarching, completely powerful image: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This Jesus, who calls out for all that listen to his voice, not only gathers the sheep but even lays down His life for them. This is an amazing Shepherd, whose goodness must be that of God. We must not confuse our methods with the gospel, thinking somehow that it is the method rather than the gospel that saves people. It is by the proclamation of the cross that men and women are won to the Lord Christ. It is through foolishness of preaching that God saves people: “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know god, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (I Corinthians 1:21). Speak the word of the cross, and some will believe. The word of Christ guarantees it. Moreover, the history of the church confirms the truth and wisdom of Christ’s teaching.

The One Shepherd: The people for whom Jesus lays down His life are not just the chosen few. The life is laid down for everyone. When we have learned that well, we will be able to live in the fullness of God’s life. Jesus Christ is source of our unity and its basis. Therefore, it is only in Jesus Christ that two men, or women, or races can ever become one. We have a responsibility as the sheep who know the shepherd to let ourselves and

others know that the fold has an open door. Jesus is both shepherd and door the one who gives life in every sense.

In his commentary on this passage William Barclay tells of an incident from the life of Egerton Young, the first missionary to the Red Indians of Saskatchewan, Canada. Young had gone to these Indians with the message of the love of God the Father, and they had received it like anew revelation. When he told his message an old chief said, "When you spoke of the great Spirit just now, did I hear you say, "Our Father?" Yes, I did," said the missionary. "We know Him as Father because He is revealed to us as Father by Jesus Christ."

"That is very new and sweet to me," said the chief, "We never thought of the great Spirit as Father. We heard Him in the thunder; we saw Him in the lightning, the tempest and the blizzard, and we were afraid. So when you tell us that the great Spirit is our Father; that is very beautiful to us." The chief paused, and then, as though the glory of it were even then breaking over him, he asked; "Missionary, did you say that the great Spirit is your Father?" "I did" said Young; "And said the chief, "did you say that He is the Father of the Indians?" "Yes," said the missionary. "Then," said the old chief, like one on whom the light had now burst; "you and I are brothers."

This is the only possible unity for men on the earth. Nothing we ever do will abolish distinctions between nations. There will always be nations. Nothing (as far as I can see) will ever abolish denominations. But in spite of these things, in spite of race, nations, and denominations, there can be a real and visible unity for those who acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Shepherd. As Christians we are marching and going together to the same eternal home. It is the knowledge of these truths and, above all, of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ for us that will draw us closer to one another

"Lord Jesus, of You I Will Sing as I journey"

I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey,
But courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side.
And with all of the people you're saved by your love...
We'll sing to the dawn at the end of our journey.

There Can Be Unity: "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). The only possible unity for men is in

their common son-ship with God. In the world there is division between nation and nation; in the nation there is division between class and class. There can never be one nation; and there can never be one class. The only thing which can cross the barriers and wipe out these distinctions; is the Gospel of Jesus Christ telling men of the universal fatherhood of God. Let me speak of the real translation of the text beyond possible doubt. "They shall become one flock, one shepherd," or even better; "They shall become one flock and there shall be one shepherd." The unity comes from the fact, not that all the sheep are forced into one fold, but they all hear, answer and obey one shepherd. It is not an ecclesiastical unity; it is a unity of loyalty to Jesus Christ. The fact that there is one flock does not mean that there can be only one Church, one method of worship, one form of ecclesiastical administration. But it does mean that all the different churches are united by a common loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Awake, my soul, in joyful lays,
And sing thy great Redeemer's praise:
He justly claims a song from me,
His loving-kindness is so free.

He saw me ruined in the fall,
Yet loved me notwithstanding all,
And saved me from my lost estate,
His loving-kindness is so great.

Our blessed Shepherd is altogether lovely, the beautiful Jesus, our shepherd. Why is he so beautiful? Because of the way he relates to us, calls us by name, and knows us, and because we know him and he sees to our every need. Why is he so beautiful? Because he is the door, and when we go in, we find protection and salvation. And when we go out, we find pasture and abundant life. Why is he so beautiful? Because of his heart. Because he laid down his life for his sheep. And he offers us all a place with him.

Jesus says, "I am the gate." He says in another place, "I am the way." And he is. There is no other way to God but through the door, Jesus Christ. If you have never received this relationship, this provision, this heart, submit yourself to the shepherd as Lord and Bishop of your soul today. And if you are already one of his sheep, God wants you to enjoy the benefits of being in the flock. He is the beautiful shepherd. Worship him in your heart day by day.