

THE SHEPHERD'S PRESENCE
April 13, 2008
First Presbyterian Church -- Post, Texas
Psalm 23 and John 10:1-10

Several years ago, **The Christian Century** (February 13, 2002) contained some interesting and bizarre reflections by seminary professors on how and when theological education happens. In the article entitled, "Lecture Interrupted," William Willimon, who was then Dean and professor of ministry at Duke University, told about an experience he had one summer teaching second-career ministers who were already serving in some challenging church ministries. Had this unbelievable event happened in a church in 2008 we would probably be watching it on the television or the internet.

Willimon said, "I was lecturing on effective church leadership when a large pastor from the hills of West Virginia raised his hand and said, 'Doc, I had something happen in church the Sunday before I came down here and I don't know if I handled it right or not.'" Willimon encouraged the older student to share his experience and he related that at the prayer time he asked the church if anyone had any special

prayer concerns. He said, “A woman raised her hand and said, ‘Yeah, I got one. I want you to pray that Mary Jones will stop leading my husband into adultery.’ And with that the pastor said Mary Jones jumped up screaming, ‘You, Bitch!’ and the two of them locked in a fight, pulling and jerking each other all over the church. Then their husbands got into it too, one ramming the head of the other into the backside of a pew.”

Willimon said, “I froze at the lectern with my mouth gaping, imagining this scene happening in my church. And what got me more than this pastor’s story was the class’s reaction. All of the other students sat passively, some nodding in silent agreement as if to say, “Yep, that same thing happened at my church just last week.” Apparently, no one found anything that they were hearing to be bizarre or ecclesiastically odd. Some even appeared to be taking notes.

The student pastor continued, “So, I came down out of the pulpit, pulled the two women apart, and said, ‘Stop it! Sit yourselves back down. Now I’m gonna ask one more time. And if you people don’t settle down and act like Christians, I’m gonna bust some head. Ya’ll is acting like that crowd

Paul had to put up with in Corinth.’ The pastor said, “They knew I could bust heads if I needed to because I was in the Marines before the Lord called me to seminary and I’ve also done a little pro wrestlin’. They quieted down and we went on with the service. Now Doc, my question is, was this what you would call good liturgical leadership’?”

Willimon said, “I mumbled something like, ‘Sounds good to me,’ and then I dismissed the class. I felt that was more than enough for one day. I stumbled back to my office to engage in a bit of prayer time and asked the Lord to help me be a good seminary professor.”

I laugh every time I read this story and really wish I was a member of a more exciting congregation! I share it with you today because I believe it illustrates the willingness of a shepherd to be fully present with his sheep and firmly and lovingly correct their ways in the raw life situations that sometimes present themselves. This pastor’s way of shepherding may be perceived as crude by us more sophisticated and educated upper class folk but it seemed to work for him and his flock.

And Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I came that they might have life and have life abundantly.”

The image of Jesus as the good shepherd is one that brings me great comfort and peace because when I close my eyes and picture a shepherd snoozing in the pasture with his sheep or a shepherd leading his flock away from dangerous predators, I get the feeling that there is a bond of friendship and care between the two.

A man who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest said, “Sheep tend to grow fond of their shepherds and it never ceased to amaze me, growing up, that I could walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step foot in the fold without causing complete pandemonium. Sheep seem to consider their shepherds part of the family, and the relationship that grows up between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to. A good shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure, while the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue

means food, or a two-note song means that it is time to go home.”

Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

In a sermon entitled, **The Shepherd’s Flute**, the Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor says this about the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep. “What makes the shepherd good is his willingness to get involved, to risk his life for the life of his flock. His flock. Not somebody else’s flock, which he gets paid five dollars an hour to look after, but his own flock—the one he has bought and bred, doctored and protected. He is invested in it, in more ways than one.

His sheep are his livelihood, for one thing, but they are also his extended family. They know his voice, his touch, his walk. If they are grazing with a thousand other sheep and he calls them, they will separate themselves from the crowd and follow him home. His flute is the sound of safety for them—the sound of still waters and green pastures. He knows them too, by name and personality: Houdini, who is always

escaping through some hole in the fence; Pegleg, who limps from the time she stepped in a hole; and Bossy, who likes nothing better than butting heads. There is something about ownership that creates intimacy.”

There is not a clearer picture of the intimate and devoted relationship between the shepherd and his sheep than the one a Presbyterian minister tells about the couple planning their retirement and how they work creatively, determinedly and almost incessantly to provide for their youngest child, a young woman, now in her late twenties, with Down Syndrome.

John Buchanan says, “I think of these dear parents trying to find the right living arrangement, with infinite patience, investigation, reading, researching, and interviewing until just the right group home with the most appropriate oversight could be found. I think of them working with public and private agencies to secure meaningful employment; work for pay that is appropriate, doable and necessary. And when all this is in place I think of them addressing the matter of transportation, a simple detail for most of us, but for them, perhaps the toughest hurdle of all. They worry how she will

travel daily, by herself, from her home to her job and then back again in the evening. Most of all I think of them, taking turns, following the bus on which she is a passenger, on her way to work, on her own now, out in the world, getting on a bus, finding her seat, taking care of her belongings, and watching carefully for the correct bus stop. She is secure, but totally unaware of how secure she is, because one of her parents is in a car following the bus discreetly, without her being aware of it, all the way from the corner bus stop to her place of employment and then back home again after her work is finished. I think of them doing that morning and night until they know she can do it on her own.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for Thou art with me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The experience of being safe and secure, loved and tenderly cared for is something we all need to be more whole human beings. The intimacy of being deeply known and accepted for who we are and for who we are not is something we all

crave and probably seek from the moment we are born. We all desire to be connected to others and accepted for who we are—the good and the bad, the warts, the blind spots, the odd quirky habits and the marvelous unique characteristics that make us who we are, for better and for worse.

If we were lucky we experienced some of this intimacy as children in our relationships with our parents or grandparents or are now able to give it to our children as we parent and grand parent them. If we are fortunate, we experience aspects of this intimacy in our marriages, friendships, communities, churches and work environments when the times are not too stressful and the waters are not too turbulent.

The image of the good shepherd is a great source of comfort for when we experience hurt, misunderstanding or separation in our many relationships with family, friends, and colleagues. For those times when we do not feel understood or when we act in ways that are not pretty, there is still One who is greater than our earthly limitations that knows us, accepts us, loves us truly, continues to call us back to our place in the field.

The image of the good shepherd reminds me that in my

relationship with God I am loved and tenderly cared for as well as known and accepted for the crazy, needy woman that I am much of the time. And because of what I have received from the good shepherd I am encouraged and enabled to go and do likewise.

“Go and do for others as I have done for you.”

The image of the good shepherd was made vividly clear to me when I read a delightful story from the book entitled, **Stories, Tales and a Few Small Lies of a Country Parson.** This book was written by the Rev. Robert Horine, an Episcopal priest who has served 25 years in 8 churches in the Episcopal Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky. He said he has learned great things from all of his church experiences but that in his memory of the smaller churches there was something special about the rootedness of generations, the long continuing relationships of individuals and families, their common histories, their shared experiences of joy and sorrow, triumph and failure, birth and death, their traditions, their devotion to family and community, and their hand-to-hand struggles of good and evil. In the smaller communities, Rev. Horine said, “I see a richness of character, a definition

of personality, and a sharper image of human reality that is missing in our larger society. I have learned something in these communities that I draw upon to keep in touch with humanity—including my own—who we are, who we were, and who we might be.” Robert Horine tells this story:

“For a little more than three years I was supply priest for St. Thomas. Not long before I left, Anna Sherrow, one of the older members, died, and the funeral was set for a Sunday afternoon. Just after lunch I went down the hill from the church to the Newnam Funeral Home and made my preparations. While I was waiting to begin the service I sat in the office looking out the window. I noticed an old man dressed in jeans, work shirt and straw hat—a summer uniform familiar to us middle-Americans. He either sat on the bench outside or walked about in its vicinity. I didn’t recognize him and I didn’t see him in the chapel during the service.

The burial was to be in the Proctor cemetery on a hill on the other side of the Kentucky River. My car was to follow right behind the funeral director’s. Mr. Newnam had driven away and was blocking traffic on the main street. I was about to

pull out of the parking lot when someone tapped on the driverside window.

It was the old man I had noticed earlier. He said he wanted to go 'up top.' I said I was going to the Proctor cemetery if he wanted a ride. He said he wanted to go 'up top.' I repeated my offer.

Traffic was backing up on the main street and Mr. Newnam was emerging from his car to see what the holdup was. At last the old man quit our conversation and got in the car. As we drove through the town and across the bridge and started up the hill toward Proctor, it turned out he wasn't going to the burial; he just wanted a ride to visit some folk at Proctor.

As we turned off the highway he looked ahead and first said it didn't look as if his friends were home, then he said, yes they were and asked that I stop and let him out right over there.

I didn't have a choice. I stopped to let him out and watched sadly as the lead car disappeared over a hill. I had never been to the Proctor cemetery.

Fortunately, Mr. Newnam, understanding the situation, had slowed down and I and the rest of the funeral procession arrived shortly at the cemetery. I asked Mr. Newnam who the old man was. He smiled and said he was 'Jockey' Combs, real name Albert. He was 92 years old and when he wanted to get from one place to another he just asked for a ride and people gave it to him.

That was what struck me. When Mr. Combs needed a ride he asked for it and he got it. He expected it to be given and the givers expected to give it. It was just the way they were. I think the kingdom of heaven is something like that.

When I stopped to let Mr. Combs out of my car, he opened the door, offered me his hand, and said, 'If I never see you again in this world, I'll see you in heaven.' Somehow, at the time, I felt he knew more about it than I did. And we shook on it.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I came that they might have life and have life abundantly." Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Faithful God, we come together on this beautiful and cold Spring morning to be with our friends, to give thanks for the great gift of life we experience, and hopefully to encounter a sense of the Holy that will make life a little more meaningful and us a little more whole. As we hear again the image of the good shepherd, we are reminded of just how alone and lost we so often feel. I believe that our need to feel safe, secure and somewhat in control of our fragile lives in this unpredictable world causes us to insulate ourselves from the nurturing and nudging of the shepherd and busy ourselves in our little corner of the pasture as we attempt to make life what think we want and need and hope for it to be. I also believe that the insecurities, fears, hurts, tragedies and unspeakable grief's we have experienced in this life also cause us to become closed and shut off from all that could hurt us again. However, when we do close ourselves off from the precarious and uncontrollable experiences of life and love, we are also closing ourselves off from the healing we need that helps us to feel alive and useful once again.

Remind us again, O Lord that our spiritual life, our wholeness, and our salvation do not depend on us alone. Help us to see in our midst the shepherd who hears our cries, knows our needs, loves us and accepts us just as we are, and whose pursuit of us is every bit as real as our needs, our seeking, and our asking. Enable us to embrace the grace, wholeness and healing that meets us at the time and place where we know our need, our brokenness, and our blindness and simply bring it all to God and follow him on the journey of love and giving life away.

Be with all of our loved ones who are sick in body, mind, and heart and be with us in our lostness and limited ways of relating and being. We pray on this day for grace to continue to sustain Nelda and Giles and their loved ones as she travels to Houston for testing, we pray for comfort and healing for the family and friend's of Jerry's colleague, Charlie Peek as they have gratitude for his accomplished life and we give thanks for the safe and miraculous arrival of Logan and Hunter Adams and pray that your loving presence would be with them and their family as they adjust to life in this world. May your amazing grace continue to pursue us and may we reach out to you and be open to the joy of the

journey as we follow you and receive astonishing new life by getting good at giving life away. In Jesus name we pray together, Our Father...AMEN.