A.M.D.G. 4th Sunday of Easter – B Text: John 10: 11-18

April 26th, 2015

**John 10: 11-18**  ‘**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.’

**Called To Be Shepherds**

For those churches who follow the lectionary, as we do – a 3 year cycle of set readings from the Bible – this 4th Sunday after Easter is known as ‘Good Shepherd’ Sunday. This image of ‘the Good Shepherd’ is a compelling one – even for us in this 21 Century urban context – who have little or no firsthand knowledge of shepherds and sheep. But what is it *specifically* that continues to speak to our hearts? What is it about this image of God as our shepherd that comforts us, inspires us, challenges us? Unlike our own context – the image of ‘shepherd’ was familiar, of course, in Jesus’ day – not only because it was an agriculturally based society in which sheep were a major commodity – providing an important source of food and clothing. Jesus and his followers would have encountered sheep and shepherds almost every day. And the image itself also had an ancient and rich history within the biblical tradition as well – in the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – of Moses and David. And metaphorically as an ancient way to describe leadership in both human and divine terms. In the beloved Psalm 23, we hear *“The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want (be in need)”*. And in the writings of the prophet Ezekiel: *“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, says the LORD God. I will seek the lost, I will bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak … and I will feed them with justice.”* So when the Gospel of John speaks of Jesus as the ‘Good Shepherd’ in our reading this morning – the image is filled with rich and beloved power – both to the early church followers of Jesus and to our modern church ears.

There are many different aspects of today’s gospel reading that would lend themselves to further exploration. But there were two phrases that spoke to me in particular as I was preparing for this morning’s sermon. The first is the way Jesus refers to himself in this passage as the ‘Good Shepherd’. In the original Greek translation, the word for ‘*good’* is ‘*kalos*’ which more fully means *‘to model or embody’* something. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he models or embodies the characteristics talked about in Psalm 23 or Ezekiel 34 in reference to God as shepherd – protection, compassion, justice – and a willingness to give everything – to ‘lay down his life’ for the sheep.

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But while we may take comfort and reassurance as the recipients of Jesus as our ‘good shepherd’ – guiding, protecting, caring and loving us – our scriptures today call us beyond being passive receivers – to ***ourselves*** being shepherds – modelling and embodying God’s love to our world – a world that is not restricted to the church, or to those like us, or known to us. In verse 16 of our passage this morning, Jesus also speaks about *“the other sheep that do not belong to this fold …. I must bring them also, so there will be one flock, one shepherd.”*

But who are these other sheep? I do not personally think, as has often been preached – that this necessarily means trying to win souls for Christ, or bringing religion to the unchurched, and more people to sit in our pews. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book ‘An Altar In The World’, writes, *“At its most basic level, the everyday practice of being with other people is the practice of loving the neighbour as the self. More intricately, it is the practice of coming face to face with another human being, preferably someone different enough to qualify as a capital ‘O’ OTHER – and at least entertaining the possibility that this is one of the faces of God.”* (p.94)

When Jesus speaks about “*bringing other sheep into the fold*” – to me, it has more to do with recognizing the face of God – particularly in those whom we identify as ‘*other’* because of their skin colour, race, religion, economic status or lack of it, gender, sexual orientation or geographical location. And finding ways to model or embody – to *be shepherds* – of the love of God so that there is respect, just, safety and peace for all God’s people in the ‘fold’ that is our global family. As the ‘Good Shepherd’, that was what Jesus did. He lived his life among the ‘other’ – seeing in the prostitute, the outcast, the leper, the poor, and those of other cultures like the Samaritan woman at the well – the face of God.

I find it interesting that in English, there is no singular form of the word ‘sheep’. In God’s eyes, both ‘I’ and ‘the Other’ are one – each of immeasurable worth. And when we look beyond the label of ‘other’ in a person to see the face of God – we can no longer remain indifferent to the plight of our sisters and brothers; we can no longer insulate ourselves to the pain and suffering of any part of our common humanity.

In a sense, that is what Angelina Jolie was speaking about in her role this week as UN Special Envoy on Refugee issues. Part of her duties include travelling to various vulnerable areas of the world. On January 25th of this year, she spoke with refugees in a UN camp in Northern Iraq. In her statement this week, Jolie said, *“We cannot look at Syria, and the evil that has arisen from the ashes of indecision, and think this is not the lowest point in the world’s inability to protect and defend the innocent.”* She also voiced concern over the growing crisis on the Mediterranean, where more than 1,300 migrants fleeing from North Africa have drowned at sea over the last 3 weeks. We cannot simply label these people as ‘others’ and insulate ourselves from their desperation and pain. These are our brothers and sisters. These are the beloved faces of God.

Today’s scriptures reassure us that we are loved, held, guided and known by the Good Shepherd. But they also send us back out into the world in turn, to ***be*** shepherds of God’s love – embodying the presence of the Christ wherever there is pain, injustice and need – and seeing the face of God in everyone we meet.