

"A Community of Sheep"

Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

May 7, 2017 -- 4th of Easter

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. {43} Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. {44} All who believed were together and had all things in common; {45} they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. {46} Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, {47} praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

1 Peter 2:19-25

For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. {20} If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. {21} For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. {22} "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." {23} When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. {24} He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. {25} For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

John 10:1-10

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. {2} The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. {3} The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. {4} When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. {5} They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." {6} Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. {7} So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. {8} All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. {9} I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. {10} The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Later today we have our 'summer trips meeting' which is the annual gathering of youth and a parent that is one of those necessary things. We share information and gather information and talk some about expectations and try to start building about a month or so in advance some anticipation so that the kids can settle in for some inspiration.

I've been to a few of these meetings and a few Montreats and I've always thought that that gathering of a thousand or so kids and our own house full of kids is a microcosm of the church. Just like the whole church you've got the ones who you can scratch and they bleed church like it's part of their genetic code. There are the ones who are a present a little less often but who still find the church to be important in their lives. These days there are also lots and lots who are more "occasional" but find the experience worthwhile. And of course there are those who do church for that assortment of 'other' reasons. Pretty much the same as any room full of people on a Sunday morning or more exactly any roll of any church.

In the epistle lesson from 1 Peter today, the writer, either Peter or a student of his says, remembering Jesus own fondness for the 23rd Psalm Old Testament sheep and shepherd analogy, "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls." This of course continues Jesus own claim in John 10 to be the good shepherd , which like it or not means that we are the sheep. To better understand

ourselves as the church we are, well, like a flock of sheep. Because we're like sheep.

Being with kids at Montreat is a lot like taking care of a flock of sheep. This afternoon they have to sign a covenant that means they promise to be good sheep. For our part we promise to provide for them the basics, the still waters, green pastures, over running cup kind of stuff. But people are people and we're like sheep. It may not be flattering but when Jesus uses the analogy he knows it's true. Sheep aren't all that smart, they have a tendency to follow the crowd, they always think that the grass is greener somewhere else, they have a tendency to wander off and sometimes get lost.

You have to make sure the younger ones use the still water for occasional bathing but regardless by the 3rd day the boys room smells like a pile of wet wool. You have to work hard because sheep have a short attention span and get easily distracted especially by other rams and ewes. And like the good shepherds that we are, or at least good sheep dogs, once the sheep are gathered in the fold for the evening, you've got to keep them in the sheepfold at night latching the gate behind them or you might lose them to any number of real or imagined 'beasts' that might get them.

Jesus, followed primarily by fisherman, not one shepherd in the bunch, still uses this image because his culture was agrarian. We know it primarily because ever so often we talk about it here. Jesus is both the protecting

shepherd and lamb of God whose sacrifice saves us. So, we like sheep should follow the shepherd for one pretty good reason, the shepherd cares for and saves the sheep. It is a great setup, for the sheep.

We tend to like the image of the shepherd. It gives us a kind of warm fuzzy feeling to consider Jesus as the good shepherd and to think about the church as his flock. We like to think about hearing a voice and faithfully following. We know that the good shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep. Jesus has done so for us. We know about his care for us, his concern for us, his devotion to us, his love for us. We know that Jesus is our Lord, and the Lord is our shepherd. And we are called to follow his voice.

If we take a look at the description of the early church as provided by Luke in Acts it is obvious that the plan can work. The followers, the sheep, being called to be a flock by the shepherd are willing to devote themselves to the teachings of the shepherd under studies, the apostles as the apostles tell them the good news of the shepherd. They share the breaking of the bread and their prayers. Their ability to believe and follow is enhanced by the things the apostles do in their midst through the power of Christ. And like a good flock, all who believed were together. Presumably in one place. And they had all things in common, including a willingness to sell their possessions and their goods and to distribute the proceeds to all as need arose. Through their worship and devotion more and more were added to their number. By their love for and

commitment to Jesus and this new church, they acted as shepherd for one another. But it didn't last.

Because, sadly, we are not really sheep. Sheep that hear the shepherd's voice and tune out all the others. Unlike sheep we follow the strangers voice all the time. We jump right over the inclined form of our shepherd sleeping in the gate of our fold and bound away, lost again, to our own devices, to the voice of influences which would lead to our destruction. There were then and are now, many voices beckoning us to follow that come not only with great regularity but come convincingly, and pleadingly and charismatically and find us as straying and looking for greener pasture. There are the voices we hear and often follow today that would threaten the fold, that would disperse us and steal our us away from the master.

Our Shepherd is always willing to watch and wait, protecting from above. We, like sheep, have gone astray. We find ourselves drained by the pitfalls of life, exhausted by the struggle to survive, engorged by the excess of our living. What voice do we follow -- is it the shepherd calling? Do we hear the voice of the shepherd saying follow me, that it may not be easy but it is the way?

It's why what we do is so important. It's why we plead with you to come to worship, to come to Sunday school, to read your Bibles, to pray. It's why we are so concerned that so few children come to Sunday School and why we work so hard on LOGOS. It's why summer trips to Montreat and Massanetta aren't, for

us, simply weeks of play in the mountains. We do these things because we know that this is where the discernible voice of the good shepherd can be found. A voice we need to follow so that we might have life, and life more abundantly.

This morning the good shepherd sets a table for us in the presence of all the other voices in here (point to head) and out there that would keep us from him. He sets the table with bread from his own sacrifice and with a cup that runs over in grace born of his love for us. Come, little flock, take and eat, take and drink.