

The Rev. «GreetingLine»
Stanford Memorial Church
May 7, 2006

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?

“I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me.”
~ John 10:14

There’s a story about witty and well-cultivated cousins Sylvia and Frederic. While attending a performance of Handel’s Messiah, they listened to one of the well-known sections of the oratorio from the prophet Isaiah: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.” In the custom of Baroque vocal works, the phrases are repeated many times. “All we like sheep have gone astray.” The chorus sings, “we like sheep...we like sheep. We like sheep....we like sheep.” Frederic turned to Sylvia and muttered, “I like sheep too, in moderation.”

Based on our opening prayer and the gospel reading today, you’ve probably figured out that the scriptural theme of the day has to do with sheep and shepherds. We’ll do our best to maintain moderation. More than likely, images of soft and fuzzy creatures may come to mind. There are also challenges with the 23rd Psalm. Sentimental overuse of this great psalm has diluted its original power. In just a few lines, it conveys the distilled wisdom of generations, offering us a way of seeing the world that renders it less frightening, teaching us to deal with the loss of people we love and deal with conflict with people who do us harm. It shows us how to recognize the presence of God at times and in places where we might think God was absent.

Truth be told, in our time, biblical memory is rather scarce these days, even among intellectual and religious communities. Engaging and re-engaging with the Scriptures responsibly and deliberately, as Scotty preached last week, is a critical and life giving endeavor. And while it is impossible to re-create the situation of those who first heard the words *I am the good shepherd*, we have to make an attempt in order to distill it from a fuzzy concept to a reality of incomparable power.

It might be helpful to remember that everything Jesus said in his earthly life was related to or inspired by or quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures. When he said *I am the good shepherd*, those who heard it were aware of a rich background stretching back through centuries of their own history. The shepherd image was deeply embedded in the living faith of Israel. For example, a crucial passage in the prophet Ezekiel, written when the people had been sent into miserable exile in Babylon reads: “Thus says the Lord God: I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep...you are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God...”

One scholar suggested that it is not easy for us to appropriate the impact of such a passage upon the collective memory of a people who had been living for centuries under the rule of first one and then another colossal, overwhelming pagan culture. We have to try to imagine what it meant to them to know that in spite of everything there were these promises that God would bring them home again, restore their losses and shelter them from every harm.

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With this bit of background, perhaps it is possible to glimpse the impact of the way Jesus talks about himself. In the Christian Scriptures, the motif of the shepherd is no longer used to refer to God. The imagery has shifted entirely to Jesus. This is true in all four gospels, but it is most obvious in today's gospel of John: "*I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*"

So these are not just sweet, sentimental sayings about what a kind and loving person Jesus is. Nor are they assurances that Jesus is going to remain relentlessly positive and never speak a harsh or critical word. There is a time and place to debate and dispute, to protest, to make noise, to overturn tables in the temple as Jesus did. But it happened not to finally get opinions right so all the wrong could be excluded. Jesus turned the tables so that the temple could once again become a house of prayer for all nations, an inclusive place that welcomes all into its transforming mystery and power. What does this mean? It means that ultimate power and ultimate love are united in one person. Think about it. Power and love are two things people can't do without. We all know about the data concerning children in orphanages in Romania or anywhere where they are not held or touched or talked to. The human being cannot thrive without love. We know that. But what is less generally acknowledged is that powerlessness is very bad for human beings. Powerlessness, as one preacher put it, produces anger, which produces paralyzing depression at one end of the spectrum and at the other, murderous violence. We are much less likely to admit the ill effects of powerlessness than of lovelessness. After all, giving love doesn't sound threatening. Granting power is another matter. All over the world, including in this country, Christians on the top of the socioeconomic heap, as well as the political heap, have spoken endlessly of love while preventing people of lower economic means from having any power.

In the Good Shepherd, power and love meet. But this is where it gets on some level, complicated. In *What's Wrong with the World*, G. K. Chesterton wrote: ***The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried.*** Making sense of the world around us is a very tall order these days and it requires that we find some way to keep our heads, and our theology, clear. We are challenged to cultivate an alternative power, an alternative source of meaning. We continue to grapple with the morality of American military power. It seems a never-ending imperative to understand how faith and religious belief affects our relationship to our own country, one another and the global community and how our love of God calls us to speak up for the powerless.

Let me cut to the chase here. It's probably no surprise to you that I have a well stocked library of serious religion books. How enormously exciting that must be you're thinking. Needless to say I spend plenty of time pondering and wrestling with just what G.K. Chesterton meant by the Christian ideal and what it means to love as Christ loved and speak up for the powerless.

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Recently I picked up a book called *Red and Blue God, Black and Blue Church: Eyewitness Accounts of How American Churches are Hijacking Jesus, Bagging the Beatitudes, and Worshiping the Almighty Dollar*. No, it's not written by some high-octane religious scholar, but by a woman named Becky Garrison who is described as a master of satire with a theological black belt. She is the contributing editor for *The Wittenburg Door*, the country's oldest, largest and basically only religious satire magazine.

The book, published this year, is her attempt to shine a bright light on hypocrisy from both sides of the political spectrum, exposing how both red and blue Christians hold hostage the teachings of Jesus in service to their own partisan gain. Garrison claims that what's lacking is a true understanding of Christ's mandate to love all of humanity – including our enemies – which if honored, would open the door to honest dialogue and understanding that transcends political labels. She writes: “If we consider the possibility that others do not feel and think the same we do, we suddenly feel very small in a mysterious, expansive universe. There is a security in a world where all the others are like me. It's a false security, but we prefer it to no security at all. So we band together with like-minded people in a concerted effort to ward off our perceived enemies. It's us against the world – reason and compassion be damned. These groups tend to be governed more by fear than love. IF religious communities become preoccupied with the question of who's right to the exclusion of considering whether they are truly good, bearing good fruit, manifesting love (as Kevin read for us from the 1st letter of John: let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action), they're destined to fade, wither, and fail.”

While I realize that little in this book is necessarily new insight or hasn't manifested itself in other forums, it's been a dose of fresh air. There is nothing hidden between the lines. It is transparent writing, and frankly I think we could use a little bit of humor mixed in with the serious, daunting and tense moments of our time. It also helps us not to take ourselves too seriously. Satire in full swing, in her last chapter on understanding what to love as Christ loves means, entitled *Where is the Love?* Garrison provides the words to a song called “Jesus Loves Me, But He Can't Stand You”: ***I'm raising my kids in a righteous way, so don't be sending your kids over to my house to play; yours'll grow up left-leaning and gay; I know Jesus told me on the phone today....woo woo woo.***

Will sarcasm and cynicism really help, we might ask? You'll have to decide how to answer that yourself, but I'm convinced we live somewhere between cynicism and hope every day. However, I tend to fall on the side that there are still signs of hope. As one writer put it – “there are ordinary radicals all around.” I'd like to think there are many of us here in this church and on this campus today. So we must not allow ourselves to detach from religious institutions, our communities or one another in a self-righteous cynicism. That's too easy and too empty. We need to be committed to being bridge builders and expressing our prophetic voice. If we have the gift of frustration and the deep sense that the world is a mess, let's thank God for that – not everyone has that gift of vision. It also means that we might have a responsibility to lead in new ways. Radical

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new ways. Recognizing that something is desperately wrong in the religious domain might be the first step. I think this partly suggests why a writer and satirist like Becky Garrison wrote such a book with conviction in 2006.

In *Christ of the Indian Road*, Mahatma Gandhi said:

“I suggest first that all of you Christians, missionaries and all, must begin to live more like Jesus Christ. Second, I would suggest that you must practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down. Third, I would suggest that you must put your emphasis on love, for love is the center and soul in Christianity. Fourth, I would suggest that you study the non-Christian religions more sympathetically in order to find the good that is in them, so that you might have a more sympathetic approach to the people.”

The world is thirsty. All creation is groaning. I have to agree with Garrison and Gandhi and many others that Christianity in particular as it is has not satisfied the souls of those who hunger for another way of life. I read this week that a skeptic asked a friend: “You are all just a little group of radical idealists. What makes you actually think you can change the world?”

She said, “If you will take a closer look at history you will see that’s the only way it has ever been done. Welcome to the irresistible revolution...welcome to the revolution of little people, guerilla peacemakers, and dancing prophets, the revolution that loves and laughs. The revolution begins inside of each of us, and through little acts of love it could transform us, our communities and the world.”

In the Good Shepherd, power and love meet. Who will lead the revolution?

Acknowledgements:

Red and Blue God, Black and Blue Church; Becky Garrison, 2006
Irresistible Revolution; Living as an Ordinary Radical; Shane Claiborne, 2006
The Lord is My Shepherd; Harold S. Kushner, 2003
Help My Unbelief; Fleming Rutledge, 2000