

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Year A

The One I Feed

[RCL] Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10; Psalm 23

An Episcopal bishop who served many years ago in the upper Midwest of the United States used to love telling stories he had learned from the Native Americans of the area, many of whom were Episcopalians. Here is one of them.

A wise man among the Indians – many Native Americans in the Midwest prefer to be called Indians – was asked by his grandson about the conflict and discord in the world. The elder reflected for a moment and then replied, “My child, there are two dogs battling within my heart. One is full of anger, hatred, and rage. The other is full of love, forgiveness, and peace.” The old man paused, and he and his grandson sat for a moment in silence by the side of the stream. Finally, the boy spoke again, “Grandfather, which dog will win the battle in your heart? The one filled with hatred, or the one filled with love?” The old man looked at his grandson and replied, “The one I feed will win.”

Our world today, decades later, is still untamed and full of conflict. We can see it daily on our televisions and read about it online. We do not have to drive very far in our cars to feel it even on our streets. The world is a dangerous place, whether we live in the Middle East or the American Midwest. Yet, the conflict we experience is not truly there on our streets or in our neighborhoods -- much less in lands far from us. The conflict is always fought out in the human heart. The Indian sage was right. Too many of us still feed the dogs of hatred and rage.

Jesus knew this fact at least as well as we do, for his world was really not much different from our own. Indeed, many of the conflicts of his time and his land are with us even today, their unfortunate victims spilling over into refugee camps and resettlement centers across Africa, Europe and parts of Asia. The human heart does not change so quickly or easily. And, the world today still has its share of “thieves and bandits,” as Jesus calls them in our Gospel account today, ready to snatch and scatter the flock.

We in the West like to think that we are in control, that no one can hurt us if we just build a wall tall enough to keep them out, and that no problem is so intractable that it cannot be solved. All we need, we are tempted to believe, is a little common sense and some well-honed negotiating skills. After all, that is how deals are done. Yet events of the past few years must make us doubt our most cherished convictions. We actually do not have our act together. And, we remain as vulnerable to our own sinfulness, gullibility, and the blandishments of contemporary life as to far-off terrorists and revolutionaries.

Left to our own rhetorical devices, we might not have chosen dirty, bleating, vulnerable sheep as the appropriate image for ourselves as Christians populating this sleek post-modern world of digital efficiencies and sophisticated technological solutions. Surely, we share precious little DNA with ewes and rams after all. Yet as one animal behaviorist also reminds us, “We spent quite a long time evolving together” with our animal cousins. So, like it or not we probably have more in common with the sheep of Jesus’ story than we care to admit. Despite its thin veneer of order and discipline, humankind remains as messy and chaotic as is a flock of sheep without a shepherd.

The shepherds of Jesus' day endured sun and rain for days or weeks on end and were often as dirty and smelly as the flocks they tended. No smartly-styled business casual attire for them. But unlike their oblivious ovine charges, shepherds then as now were ever vigilant and uncomplaining, watching for danger and trouble, providing pasture and allaying the thirst of their flocks. The shepherd knew his sheep as no one else. And the sheep followed him, as Jesus tells us, "because they know his voice."

Jesus speaks of himself in this Gospel passage as "the gate for the sheep." Some scholars contend that shepherds of the period would often place their own bodies across the small opening or aperture of the sheep enclosure during times of peril, risking their lives for the sake of their flock. Perhaps it is this image of the shepherd as human gate that Jesus has in mind with this metaphor; his own presence stretched out, as on a cross, bridging the disciples' —and our own -- base insecurities. "Whoever enters by me," he assures us, "will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

The hymns sung today at church will likely not include the Whiffenpoof song but the words are nevertheless apt and worth remembering. "We're poor little lambs who have lost our way. Baa, baa, baa." It is all too easy to lose direction -- to lose our bearings and a sense of who we are and where we are going in our lives. It is all too easy, in other words, to go astray like lost sheep. But it is just then that we are most vulnerable to the "thieves and bandits" of the world, most vulnerable to the more destructive animal instincts that lurk in every human heart, our own included.

This is certainly worth bleating about, of course, but it does not make us somehow notorious sinners. It is hard to imagine vicious sheep after all. Still, we are all too familiar with the well-known story of the wolf in sheep's clothing. Even today there is wisdom in Aesop's ancient fable. Appearances can be deceiving. Each of us is capable of sin and hurt. There are always creatures at war within our hearts, hidden beneath our warm woolens and tasteful tweeds. Which of them shall we feed?

The old bishop often concluded his story of the Indian teacher with a kind of postscript: "Which one of the dogs will win?" asked the boy of his grandfather. "The one I feed will win," replied the elder. But then he continued, "My child, feeding one dog or the other is only part of the answer. For the Great Spirit feeds each of us—and it is from the Great Spirit that we first learn to feed others at all."

We are all fed by the Great Spirit of mercy and forgiveness this Easter season. People everywhere, ourselves included, are starving for the Spirit's love and compassion. We have come to the Paschal banquet ready to keep the feast, eager to partake of the Lord's abundance and be nourished for the journey ahead. But the world around us is still a place of famine and danger. And, the human heart ever yearns to hear the voice of the shepherd who brings peace and God's reconciling love. As we have been fed, so must we now feed others in Christ's name.

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