

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

COMING WHEN CALLED
Sermon for Easter 4A—John 10:1-10
LPC, 5/11/14

If you ever need to smile, imagine your name being said by all the people who have ever loved you.

My father had a distinctive way of saying my name. He would drop the “h” and pronounce each syllable with equal weight: “Sin-tee-ah.” There is something really special about that. Just recalling the sound of his voice saying my name calls up the memory of love, and not just the memory. I feel that love anew.

If you have a similar memory, and I pray God you do, hold it in the back of your mind while I talk about sheep.

Every year, soon after Easter, we celebrate “Good Shepherd Sunday,” where we read the beloved 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” and hear a reading from the 10th chapter of John’s Gospel where Jesus’ teaching employs variations on the theme of a shepherd leading sheep. This year we hear the beginning of the chapter, where Jesus emphasizes the image of the sheepfold gate, comparing himself not only to the shepherd, but to the gate itself.

I found out something this week about keeping sheep in certain agrarian cultures. In a community, there might be several households that keep large flocks of sheep. During the day, the individual flocks graze separately on the land belonging to their owners, under the shepherds appointed by each household. But at night, all the flocks are corralled together, so that they can be guarded by just a few people. This enables many sheep keepers to get some sleep, while only one or two take the responsibility of protecting the sheep from nocturnal perils.

Come morning, the flocks are separated out again, and taken out to pasture by their owners. How do you sort them out? Each farmer has trained his or her own sheep from birth to respond to a unique call or whistle.

So picture this: four farmers, each with a flock of about a hundred sheep, brings them in from pasture come nightfall and corrals them into a common sheepfold that has a single gate and some kind of fencing or walls to keep all the sheep together. One of the farmers, or someone they designate, keeps watch during the night.

The gatekeeper will probably stay somewhere near the gate because if the gate fails, all the sheep will be lost. This does mean that if the sheepfold is large, there are going to be unguarded stretches of fence, which could conceivably be scaled by a dishonest person bent on sheep-stealing. However, the entire arrangement makes enough economic sense that the farmers feel it’s worth the risk

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In the morning, the other farmers return. The gatekeeper opens the gate and the shepherds make their individual calls. The sheep sort themselves out in response to their own shepherd's call and follow their own shepherd back to pasture.

This is the picture to which Jesus was probably referring in today's lesson. Jesus has come to the gate like an honest shepherd. He has legitimacy and authority, so he is allowed access to the sheep. He utters a distinctive call, so that those who belong to him will respond and follow him. He even calls the sheep by name. I don't know if it's common practice for shepherds to personalize their sheep this way and see them as individuals, but Jesus is the kind of shepherd who does.

Then Jesus leads his flock. He does not push them from behind. Like people, sheep do not respond well to being pushed from behind. But give them someone to follow, especially someone they know will feed them, and they will go just about anywhere.

We tend to think of sheep as stupid creatures, but if Jesus is correct, they have something over human beings. Jesus says that sheep will only follow the call of the person they know will take care of them. They will not follow the voice of strangers.

Humans, on the other hand, seem to be subject to all kinds of calls. People will follow fads and trends and politicians and commentators and advertisements and all kinds of cultural phenomena that do them no good at all. People like to think of themselves as free, but in practice they fall in line, sheep-like, to all kinds of conventions and addictions. There is no freedom in that. There is no life in that.

There is life in following Jesus, and abundant life at that. Following Jesus is indeed perfect freedom. This is the way of love, forgiveness, peace, healing and service. Following Jesus, the shepherd of love, forgiveness, peace, healing and service, is the way to freedom and abundant life. Why would we want to follow anything or anybody else?

Following the right shepherd has the potential to totally transform everything you do. To express this point, I'd like to share with you a poem that was circulated among parish leaders this past week by our own Bishop Klusmeyer:

Nothing is more practical than finding God,
than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way.
What you are in love with,
what seizes your imagination,
will affect everything
It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends, what you read, whom you know
what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.
Fall in Love, Stay in love,
and it will decide everything.