

**The Liturgy for July 26, 2020
Good Shepherd Sunday**

~Thought For Meditation:

The shepherd always tries to convince the sheep that their interests and his own are the same. **Stendhal**

~GATHERING:

~LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE:

~CALL TO WORSHIP

Grace, peace and mercy be yours. Let's worship together.

~OPENING PRAYER ENDING WITH THE LORD'S PRAYER

You who we call by so many names, hear us now, as we call you our Good Shepherd. Lead us and tend us; feed us and mend us in this time of worship. Help us to listen for your voice – the voice that brings us rest and renewal, as together we pray, saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.**

~Scripture:

Twenty-Third Psalm

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no

evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

John 10: 1-10

‘Very truly, I tell you, the one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ So again Jesus said to them, I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

~Reflection: *On Laying Our Bodies Down*

What’s your take on fences?

Do you have one around your yard? White picket, iron railing, full on privacy fence? Sensible frost fence perhaps with an accompanying vine growing over it to “soften it.”

I am quite conflicted when it comes to fences. I love our traditional NB rail fence. Although when Betsy Epperley looked at it she said “Well where I’m from that’s called a Virginia rail fence. We make fences everywhere don’t we? We carted trailer loads of 100 year old cedar rails home from an old farmstead in Harvey. We put it up in the traditional way: no nails or cementing, just rails zigzagged around the property, rails that grow a lovelier shade of aged grey every year.

And while in Ireland I became besotted by stone wall style fencing...especially when a donkey was popping his head over the top of it!

But I’m kind of a wide open, come-on-in kind of person. And fences are so...boundaried. But Robert Frost had a good point...maybe they also make good neighbours. A sense of separation and privacy.

And the mama bear in me knows how profoundly important they are for keeping children and dogs *IN* and safe.

Sometimes the fence is all about what you are keeping *OUT*: who has a fence around their garden? We love deer, but must they have ALL the vegetables?? And what about those groundhogs? Thieves! But we try...we keep fencing.

Like we've done probably more vigorously since 9-11...as our sense of security in the world began to diminish: the impulse it seems, is to put up all kinds of fences and gates. Or more recently: *build a wall!*

And in a different way, in these COVID times, haven't we had to practice a whole new art of fencing and gating as we arrange the way we work and live and shop. In very real ways, as we face the fear of the pandemic, we have had to learn to fence our families; our homes; our yards; our churches.

In the story today from John's Gospel, fear was a very familiar neighbor too. John's community was one that existed some 70 years after the time of Jesus. So this was first Century Mediterranean world...and the "People of the Way," or the "Jesus movement" as it was known, was still in its early days. They were struggling to define themselves amid so many competing religions and philosophies; seeking to know how to move and present themselves in the world – even as Rome had them in their crosshairs. They refused to honour the Roman Emperor as a God, so persecution, the threat of extinction, was omnipresent: They were so many lambs for the slaughter.

So...what do you do, in such a time as this? How do you stand in the midst of such fear? Surely the "People of the Way" started throwing up fences...big strong walled fences with sturdy gates? Wouldn't that be the safest way to go?

No. Instead, they told stories. Under cover of darkness, hidden from the authorities, one ear tuned for the sound of Roman boots, they told one another stories. Odd stories of ordinary things like yeast and seeds and trees of the field; miraculous stories of wine from water and treasures that can't be lost and a hillside full of people fed on 5 loaves and 2 fish. Stories that named them and laid claim to them: that told them who they were, *whose* they were. And *how* they were to live in the world.

In these clandestine meetings one of their favourite stories was of the shepherd and the sheep. This metaphor made such sense to them. In ancient Palestine, the shepherds brought all the sheep of the village into a common sheepfold for the night. So in the morning, it was sorting time. Sounds like it would be bedlam, right? But it wasn't. Because each shepherd had a particular name for his flock, a certain way of calling their own. Sometimes a whistle; sometimes a song. And the sheep would *only* respond to their own shepherd. Even if another shepherd tried to call the sheep by their right name, they'd get nowhere. Because the sheep would only respond to their own shepherd's voice.

Long ago, I remember a children's time where we experimented with this. The children stood at the front of the church with me, facing me, their backs to the congregation. Then I had their parents all stand. The children could not see them. Several parents, one after the other, would all speak a single child's name. I told the child that they could turn around when they heard their own parent's voice. It never failed. They knew the voice of love. The voice of their own beloved Good Shepherd .

People will say, "Sheep are dumb." Well, you know who says that? Cattle ranchers. But that is simply because sheep don't act like cattle. Cattle need to be pushed and prodded to get them anywhere. Sheep...now they want to be led. They want to know that someone is willing to go in the fray with them. To go before them. Sheep know the voice of their good shepherd and they trust it. And so they will calmly go wherever they are led: beside the still waters, into green pastures, up steep mountainsides and paths of righteousness and thorny ways and finally, finally, into the sheepfold for the night.

It is such a peaceful sort of image, isn't it? But the reality was that the shepherds needed to be watchful, on guard, at the ready, always alert. Did you notice how the story speaks of the gate several times? Turns out though, that there was no gate on the sheepfold. It was just an opening. It hardly sounded sensible until I learned that at night, with the flock safely settled, the shepherd would lay himself in the opening: would lay his body down to be the gate; to be the safeguard against all evil.

The community that John's gospel was directed to knew really understood this imagery of good shepherds – because they also knew about the evil that was all around them. Sheep were terrified of roaming wolves or bears. The people were terrified of

leaders who taxed you into poverty;

the ones who starved you while dining richly,

the ones who were willing to trade the *shalom* of community for petty self interest.

They yearned for those who were willing to lay their bodies down in defense and protection of the weak. And there is the heart of the story: of how the People of the Way were to live in this wild and dangerous world with so many uncertainties: they were to be the good shepherd. They were to lay their bodies down in love and care of one another.

I have been thinking of all the ways we are being called still to lay our bodies down, to lay ourselves on the line as it were:

To lay down our privilege that stilled voices may have their say.

To lay down our defensiveness, that we might really hear someone else's opinion or ideas

To lay down our annoyance with rules that restrict our personal freedoms: And instead to know that we are called to a certain way of living in this world by our Good Shepherd: to put the good of the whole community first; to protect the vulnerable;

And with all the fears and worries and ennui that we are living in through these tired old days, I want you to know this too: That you are called this summer to take some time and lay your body down for a good and beautiful Sabbath: to lay it down beside still waters and green pastures and have rest and renewal, that you might recall the Good Shepherd who is so near, and the table that the shepherd spread for you, and remember that your cup, truly runneth over. I know mine does.

Amen.

~A Time of Prayer

~The Benediction