

This is Pastoral Intern Ralph Weigold's farewell sermon. Having met all the requirements for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, Ralph now leaves the Christ Church community and seeks a Call to an Eastern Synod parish in need of a pastor.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD CARES

Easter 4 – Cycle B: John 10:11-18

We do not see many shepherds in our society today; in fact we may never see a shepherd around here. But in the time of Jesus, shepherds were very common indeed. If you were to walk in the countryside then, you would most likely see flocks of sheep on the hillsides, with the shepherd watching over them: a hard life. Shepherds would be out in all types of weather, hot and cold, dry and wet. It was their job to protect the sheep, to lead the sheep to water, and to take them from pasture to pasture. Once one area was all eaten up, the shepherd would lead them to another area of grass. Sheep would know their shepherd and when he called them they would follow the shepherd; they knew his voice and trusted him.

The shepherd would also fight for his sheep, fending off wolves or other animals who were trying to kill and eat the sheep; even robbers who would try to steal the sheep for themselves. A hard life indeed! If the shepherd did a good job, then everyone would have said "Now that is a good shepherd!"

Jesus used this parable of the good shepherd because the people of his day would have known the kind of life the shepherd lived. Jesus wanted to tell us something of himself; that he is the good shepherd. Jesus says "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." It is very easy to see in this verse that Jesus will never abandon the flock and that Jesus will never abandon us either. Not like the hired hands, who are only concerned for their own wellbeing, just collecting the money and not really caring for the sheep, and as soon as trouble happens running off.

In my chaplaincy at Trinity Village, especially when I first started, it was difficult for me to get to know the residents and for the residents to know me. After a short period of time, a trust was formed between us and I was able to remember most of the residents by name and they knew who I was – something similar to Jesus' teaching about the good shepherd who knows the sheep and whose sheep know the shepherd. I would walk down the halls and greet everyone: some didn't even need to look see who it was; they knew it was me by the sound of my voice. Knowing each other by name makes our relationship more personal. In our conversations, either individually or in groups, I heard many times the residents telling me that they knew that they were not alone, that Jesus was with them. It is this thought that gives them comfort. It is the comfort that the good shepherd gives, knowing us by name and being interested in us, no matter when or where.

I read this short story that illustrates how Jesus knows us: "A young lady came to her pastor's office troubled about this statement: "How does Jesus know me; how is he interested in me personally?" She asked "How can I believe that God is interested in what happens to me?"

The pastor replied, "Look at your fingers. There are billions of finger tips in the world, but no others are like yours. Even your fingertips have had special attention from God."

We are special indeed, and when we come together at the table to eat and to drink, you are given a special invitation from God to have a personal connection with Jesus through his body and blood. It is through this intimate relationship with Jesus that we know him and that Jesus also knows us.

The good shepherd also cares for those that do not belong to his flock. Jesus says: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Jesus loves all, regardless of status or physical conditions. He asks us to accept those into the flock that we do not know.

This place, this fold, is always changing; it is alive; it is a growing place. This is a place where Jesus, through his Spirit, is alive. It is a place where we encounter God through his Spirit. We are never alone and as Jesus says, wherever there are two or more who believe in me, I will be there also. This is a wonderful place.

I have been blessed to be part of the Christ Church community not just once, but two times. The first was during my contextual placement three years ago. I was mostly working with Pastor James then, but was

involved with confirmation class and assisted at worship a couple of times. I can remember back then how welcome I felt and how you accepted me into your "flock".

And now in my final year, I came back to this fold, and again you opened your arms and made me feel right at home. In our weekly discussion, I mentioned to Pastor James, it felt like coming back home again. I believe that it was the work of the Spirit that brought me back. This was a crucial year for me, and it was through the love that Pastor James and all of you have shown to me, that I have rediscovered my calling.

We are going through some difficult times in the church, but we will overcome these difficulties because of the love we have for one another, the knowledge that we are not alone in this, that the good shepherd is here. He knows us and we know him through the Holy Spirit.

As I end my internship with you today and move onward with my calling, I will remember you all in my heart. Your love, compassion, and understanding have touched me, and I pray that wherever I am called to be that I will be a good servant of the gospel, as you all have been good servants of the gospel.

The good shepherd cares for his flock; the good shepherd cares for you.