

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter 4-B; 22 April 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

The Good Shepherd

In nomine...

I. Intro

You may not know this, but I just moved to town recently. I brought with me a car that I like pretty well. That means I needed to find a new mechanic.

I took my car in a couple weeks ago and asked the mechanic to do some basic maintenance chores I'd gotten behind on. I also wanted a new tire. One had blown out and been replaced recently. Since I change them in pairs, the other one is probably due. No problem, says the mechanic.

Later in the day he called me. They've done the work I requested. But the other two tires need to be changed, too. They're not in imminent danger of failure, but they're done with their useful service life. This wasn't too shocking to me, so I told him to go ahead & change those.

That evening I went and picked up my car with fresh fluids and four new tires. We're ready to roll, right?

Well, says the mechanic, not quite. The front rotors are rusting badly and should be replaced. And when you pull the rotors, you might as well put new pads on them. Plus, that shimmy I feel when braking at highway speeds is due to a failing bearing in one of the front wheels. Bearings, he tells me, can no longer be repacked by hand the way I used to do: now they're pressed into the wheels and have to be pressed out. Dollar signs are ringing in my head.

What question am I asking now? Well, I have more than 100K miles on the car: nothing he's saying is shocking. I've seen the rust on the rotors. But do they need to be replaced now? And how can you really tell that a bearing is failing but not yet know which one?

The question that every car owner asks when taking one's vehicle in to a mechanic for service is, is the mechanic trustworthy? Is he or she going to treat me fairly or will he or she be tempted to take a little extra profit at my expense? My lack of knowledge means I don't know for sure if what my mechanic is telling me is true. Instead I simply choose to trust or not to trust.

II. Thesis

Our lives are built on lots of choices like these, to trust or not to trust. And there are different kinds of trust, aren't there? Some people I trust to do the right thing because it's right: there's a selflessness about their trustworthiness. And some people I trust do to the right thing only because it benefits them. I still trust them, but only as far as our motivations align. This is how I trust other drivers on the road. Right now they're doing the right thing, but what's the likelihood they're suddenly going to turn left across two lines of traffic, including mine, to get into that Wawa parking lot? That's what coffee will do to a person!

In our Gospel today, Jesus identifies himself as "the Good Shepherd," or even "the Beautiful Shepherd" depending on how you choose to translate the text. In making this identification, Jesus is referring back to the prophet Ezekiel who devotes a whole chapter to evil shepherds, who are abusing positions of power and leadership in order to satisfy their own desires, and God as a good shepherd who will actually cares for God's people for their own sakes. The evil shepherds can be trusted to act in ways which benefit themselves: you can count on it. God is a shepherd whose sense of responsibility for the sheep is absolute: it is disinterested in the sense that God is in it for the sheep's sake, not God's own. The welfare of the sheep is precisely God's steady purpose, no matter the consequences to God.

Psalms 23 is one of the most beloved of all the psalms. It, too, imagines God as a shepherd. God the shepherd is leading the sheep on a journey, ensuring that they have safe pastures and plentiful, clean water along the way. In the dangerous parts of the journey, the shepherd remains close by, keeping the sheep from getting lost and defending them from every danger. The journey leads to a feast where the sheep are the special guests who are honored in front of everyone. That's the kind of shepherd God is.

Jesus appropriates both these well-known images of God as shepherd and makes one of his infamous "I am" statements in John. "I am the good shepherd." This is right after Jesus healed a man born blind. You might remember that story from John chapter nine because the interchange

between Jesus and the Pharisees and the man and his parents borders on the absurd. Jesus does something good for the man, and everybody else is in a tizzy trying to figure out what it means, what they can get from it. The Pharisees have a point to prove. But when a man born blind is now able to see, it's hard to prove much else besides the self-giving love of Jesus.

III. Good News

There are lots of people who would guide us in our lives. From auto mechanics, guidance counselors, doctors, lawyers, to priests, therapists, business consultants and spiritual gurus. Politicians, pundits, political parties, news outlets all bring definite points of view. Our parents, our children, our siblings, and the neighborhood gossip all have advice for us. The quality of advice is going to differ from person to person, and even from issue to issue. We learn over time whose advice is trustworthy surrounding which issues. If we're wise, we continue making those evaluations with every piece of advice offered. And in the end, all that advice will become background noise as we learn to listen to the one source that is truly and absolutely trustworthy.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday, and we look to our Good Shepherd, Jesus. Jesus is the kind of shepherd who does what is best for his sheep – and is even willing to die for them. And not just willing, but he actually did it! Jesus died to show us how deep God's love for us really is. Then Jesus did something even more amazing: he rose from the dead. Jesus is the shepherd for whom even death is no obstacle: Jesus died and is still active and powerful to care for us. We can trust that our deaths, too, will be no obstacle for Jesus. His care for us will continue even as we ourselves move into every new season of our own existence.

IV. Invitation

We come to church to learn to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd, Jesus. We practice listening in prayer, contemplation, the reading of Scripture, song, and the rites of the church. I hope in the months to come to introduce the practice of contemplation, Centering Prayer, as a means of listening to Jesus at St. Thomas'. Centering Prayer is a form of prayer without words, one where we sit and listen and open our hearts and allow God to do God's work in ways that are deeper than conscious thought and words. Centering prayer is a way of opening one's inmost soul to the penetrating light of God who will give growth that is both real and, in my experience, only perceptible in hindsight, like watching a flower blossom. If this has been a part

of your experience in the past or something you're especially interested in trying, please speak to me after the service!

We also practice hearing Jesus speak to us through one another, through a community of Jesus-followers doing their best to listen together to the shepherd's voice. There's a lot of confused, confusing guidance out there seeking to influence how we live our lives. Faith and the witness of history testify to the trustworthiness of our Good Shepherd, and "church" is a support group for those who would choose to follow him over all those other voices.

This week I picked up my car with two new bearings and new break pads all around. Part of me is still skeptical: I am not yet convinced that this mechanic values my wellbeing over his own bottom line. But I could just be sore because I don't like spending so much money on car repairs. The jury is still out.

But Jesus has already shown us his true colors. His love for us is self-less and wholly concerned for our wellbeing. He's also uniquely able to lead us in right paths, paths of light and life. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He invites us to follow.

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