

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 3, 2020 (Easter 4A)**

Like many of you, I've always loved the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Especially in times of trouble, there's something deeply comforting about knowing, at the very core of your being, that Jesus cares for and tends to your very soul. That he protects and revives, watches over and consoles.

But I've always been a bit wary of the idea of the pastor as the shepherd of his or her own flock. I mean, we are all of us together a flock, and clergy may play a unique role in the community, but Jesus is the *real* shepherd here. The *only* shepherd here. Not me. Not any pastor. And sometimes the lines get blurred, which can cause great spiritual damage.

I think my hesitation over this imagery, if I'm honest, goes back to the 1983 film *Porky's II*. Now, I never thought I'd reference *Porky's II* in a sermon. And I certainly don't recommend this as an appropriate family bonding quarantine movie. In fact, I don't recommend it at all. It's trashy and misogynistic and full of stereotypes. Two thumbs down! But there's a scene that I can never get out of my head on Good Shepherd Sunday.

Because when the students of the Angel Beach High drama club decide to stage "An Evening With Shakespeare," a group of fanatically religious citizens object on the grounds that the works of Shakespeare are both obscene and profane. Reverend Bubba Flavel brings his flock to meet with the beleaguered principle to pressure the school into shutting down the production. And the call and response used by Reverend Bubba whenever he makes a point is, "So sayeth the shepherd" and his followers all reply, "So sayeth the flock!"

And even though this is a cartoonish caricature of conservative religion, this is not a particularly helpful model of ministry. And certainly not what Jesus had in mind when he said, "I am the Good Shepherd."

Because Reverend Bubba makes this all about *his* voice, rather than Jesus' voice. Jesus says, "He calls his own sheep by name...and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." Jesus' voice is not full of bluster, but invitation. Jesus' voice is not full of judgment, but forgiveness. Jesus' voice is not full of division, but love. The voice of Jesus gathers and builds up, rather than scatters and destroys.

During these times, it's hard not to think of us as anything but a scattered flock. We have all wandered away — not on purpose — but because of circumstance. Our life right now is not a parable of *lost* sheep, but of sheep temporarily distanced from one another.

But this community remains connected. Through the marvels of technology, yes, but primarily through our faith. The voice of Jesus is the connective tissue that binds us together and keeps us together and holds us together. We stay connected by listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls us each by name, wherever we may be. And by hanging on every word of the one who guides us through turbulent times, whatever that looks like for each one of us.

So it is the voice of the Good Shepherd that keeps us bound to one another; that keeps us safe as we collectively walk through the valley of the shadow of death; that keeps us connected as one flock. But this voice doesn't just soothe, it also challenges.

I read an article this week in a British church publication with a pretty damning headline: "YouTube sermons will not feed the hungry." Now, the context was different, as it was written by the Vicar of a small, impoverished, mostly elderly parish in London, many of whose members are unable or unwilling to watch online services. But she wrote, "Staying at home is wonderful — when you have a home, with electricity, and food, and a job, and access to the internet, and are computer literate." And that streaming worship, while important, assumes "that everybody is in a safe and comfortable home setting, and, therefore, the only need to be met is a spiritual one."

Now, I'd argue that physical needs *are* spiritual needs. But one of the great needs to emerge out of this pandemic, here on the South Shore and all over the world, is the issue of food scarcity. People are going hungry. People who have never had to use food pantries before are lining up for groceries. And the voice of the Good Shepherd says, "feed my sheep."

And that's what I am now inviting you to do. I spent time this week working with our Outreach Ministry to turn St. John's into a community food drop-off center. We have bins outside the door leading to the Memorial Garden where people can drop off groceries. We'll be publicizing a list of the most needed items and recruiting volunteers to drive food to one of three local pantries we support. This is holy work and I encourage your participation.

Of course, the streaming of online services and the feeding of the hungry cannot and should not be mutually exclusive. When we listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, the one who invites us to both love God and love neighbor, we can't help but be comforted even while offering comfort to others. That's what it means to listen to and respond to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

The article I read ends with the author saying she cannot dream of putting a notice on the church door that says "No food here, but Morning Prayer online." We can offer both. And with your help, we *will* offer both.

This flock abides only because we listen to the voice of the one, true shepherd who calls us each by name, who cares for us, who loves us. Like sheep, our only path to survival is to put our complete trust in the shepherd. When we place our lives in Jesus' protective custody he will keep us safe. Because authentic relationship with the risen Christ draws us into safety even when life's challenges arise; even when we walk through that dark valley.

Although it doesn't always feel like it these days, we don't remain locked up in the safety of the sheepfold. We live most of our lives out in the world, amid the dangers, and snares, and temptations that lurk at every turn. But when we listen to the gentle voice of the Good Shepherd, we can walk boldly in sure and certain hope of God's love for each one of us; the God who calls us each by name and walks alongside us at every step of the journey.