

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/29/2007, Easter 4C, Good Shepherd Sunday
Acts 9:36-43, John 10:22-30

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Jesus said] ²⁷My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; ²⁸and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.(John 10:27-28)

My wife Carol brought back the following story from her trip to Minnesota last week for a clergy training event. It is a story told by Brother Dave – a Norwegian clergyman born and raised on a farm there in Minnesota. It is a story about how our Good Shepherd *knows* his sheep and gives them eternal life, only the story is told in terms a dog – a grand big dog named Poncho, a mixed German Shepherd/Norwegian Elkhound of a dog.

Pastor Dave explained that if you had a farm there in Minnesota, you had to have a dog. That's just the way it was. When Dave was a boy, the first dog he remembers was a beagle, but that beagle developed a bad habit of raiding the neighbor's hen house, and one day the dog simply disappeared.

So, they got another dog, Poncho. He was a great dog and everyone in the family loved him. He drove away the varmints you don't want on a farm, like skunks. He exercised the pigs, running them to get them in shape. And he protected the family, once cornering some thieves, who jumped up onto a gas tank and prayed to be delivered from this big dog.

But, times changed and that family at last decided to sell the farm and move to town. The thing is, they could not bring Poncho with him. Pastor Dave was just a boy then. He begged, he wept, he tried to negotiate, but his family stood firm on the matter. Poncho was a free dog. He was meant for running free on the farm. He was not meant for the city. So, they gave Poncho away to some other farmer,

and they moved to the city and got themselves a town dog – a Pekinese or something.

Years passed. Then, one day, Dave was in the check-out line in the supermarket and the man in line with him turned out to be the farmer who had taken over Poncho. Was Poncho still alive? Yes, Poncho was alive and well.

Dave noted the address of the farm and headed home. But he could not reach home because he so much wanted to see Poncho again. So, he drove to the farm. There was a dirt lane leading to the farm house. Off in the distance, he saw something that might have been his old dog, so he got out of his truck and called for Poncho.

The dog started running toward him. Then Dave remembered how old Poncho had treed those thieves, and he got to worrying that maybe Poncho would not remember him after all these years, so he bent down to try to get a rock to defend himself. And Poncho reached him and leapt upon him.

And attacked him with his tongue, and slew him with kisses.

And so it will be with our Good Shepherd. He knows us. He does not forget us. And when we reach his throne, he is going to pounce upon us with kisses and welcome us home.

Our great reason for hope in this world is that Jesus is our Good Shepherd – a shepherd who knows us personally, one by one, loves us, gives us eternal life, and nothing in all the universe can snatch us out of his hand. The

hireling might run away and abandon the flock when bear or wolf approach, but not the Good Shepherd. He lays down his life for the sheep, he is so devoted to them. You are part of the Good Shepherd's flock, and so am I, and therefore life is going to turn out well for us, in green pastures beside still waters, if only we do not stray from our Good Shepherd.

This matter of straying from the shepherd brings to mind a practicality in both the farming world and the spiritual world, and that is this: shepherds often have under-shepherds. They need apprentices and fellow shepherds because often the flock is large. And in the case of the Church, the flock is meant to be very large indeed – yea, to welcome the whole world, from end to end.

It is a lovely and comforting imagine that the shepherd leaves the ninety-and-nine sheep safe in their fold and goes out in search of the one lost sheep. Yet what if there are *two* lost sheep? And what if they have strayed in opposite directions? And what if there are a whole host of meandering, contrary sheep? While a devoted shepherd goes out and searches for any one, the other straying ones are in danger too. So, as a farming practicality, the shepherd of the flock often has under-shepherds and fellow shepherds to help take care of the flock. And my spiritual point is this: even the Good Shepherd has under-shepherds, and such you are.

So was Tabitha, from today's lovely reading from the Ninth Chapter of Acts. Let me set this in context a bit. After the conversion of St. Paul, the churches throughout Judea enjoyed a season of peace — a lull in the persecutions associated with Paul. During that time, St. Peter visited one place after another and eventually came to God's holy people in a town called Lydda. There he healed a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years and paralyzed:

And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your

bed." And immediately he rose. ³⁵And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.(Acts 9:34-35)

Meanwhile, in the town of Joppa, not far away, along the Mediterranean coast, there was a disciple named Tabitha, or, in Greek, Dorcas. The Bible says a wonderful thing about this woman:

She was full of good works and acts of charity.

Especially Tabitha was full of good works toward the widows of the town, and that was very important, because widows in the ancient world were especially vulnerable and dependent upon the kindness of others. Tabitha's love for her neighbors took the form of concrete good deeds, including tunics and other garments she made for the widows. Her good deeds were tangible. They kept the body from shivering and perhaps brought some beauty into the lives of otherwise overlooked people, like our congregation's "Meals on Heels" program or the colorful guilt sewn by Sr. Elinor, whose black-and-white image we can see in our recent parish newsletter.

But there were tears in Joppa because Tabitha had died. So, the disciples there sent to Lydda to fetch Peter, who came and raised Tabitha up from death – an extraordinary miracle of the Holy Spirit able to lift our thoughts and lift our spirits to the wondrous realities now made possible by the resurrection of Jesus.

In raising up Tabitha, Peter restored to this world and to that town a much-needed under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd. The great privilege and power of Easter faith, even in our day and age, is that we may dare to be shepherds to the world – good shepherds who can no longer be frightened off, not even by death.

This world needs under-shepherds of the Lord, and they need each other. One of my favorite hymns, *Through the Night of Doubt and Sorrow* (LBW 355), includes a wonderful line of collegiality among the under-shepherds of the Lord:

Through the night of doubt and sorrow
onward goes the pilgrim band,
singing songs of expectation,
marching to the promised land.
Clear before us through the darkness
gleams and burns the guiding light;
pilgrim clasps the hand of pilgrim
stepping fearless through the night.

Let me tell you something about the ministry of the church from the perspective of a preacher. The preacher is the one who must step up to the sacred desk, but as he does so, as she does so, he is often most conscious of the help of other preachers in the congregation. He knows that without the hand clasp of fellow pilgrims, fellow ministers, fellow under-shepherds, he himself will never make it.

As the great Moses of old had Aaron to assist him, so I am blessed to assist the great preachers of this congregation. I mean you – the Moses of our world -- in your lives of faith out there in the city. I mean you who work in our congregation's Meals on Heels program. And I mean Music Director Scott Warren and our Choir. I am proud to clasp their hands and

to assist them in the powerful preaching of the Gospel they do through sacred music here at Immanuel.

When Samson was old and broken and blind, he was led by a lad to the pillars of the great house where the Philistines were making merry. They did not know the meaning of it, but Samson's hair had grown back, and his great strength had returned to his broken body. Samson did discomfort and overthrow many of the Philistines that day, when he broke down the pillars of the place. (Judges 16:24-28)

I am but the lad. The Samsons of this place have been you, including Music Director Scott Warren and our Choir. Scott now leaves us to serve at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church here in town. We will include prayer for him in this morning's intercessions, we have a Coffee Hour salute to him in the undercroft after this service, and we hope you will attend.

But in a way, we do not lose Scott. He simply goes to another portion of our Good Shepherd's flock in order to tend that part. And there he would claim no higher dignity and would strive for no higher ambition than the one you and I can claim too and can strive evermore to reach: to be under-shepherds to the Good Shepherd, even Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.