

Sheep are always front and center on this 4th Sunday of Easter and their annual day this year happens to align with our celebration of Earth and Oceans month. Every year, I am reminded of how much I don't know about sheep, the third most populous mammal in the world, after humans (8 billion) and rats (7 billion). Meanwhile, there are only 1.18 billion sheep. Downstairs, Godly Play is telling the story of the Good Shepherd this morning, although the lesson is actually called *The Good Shepherd and World Communion*. It is one of those days where upstairs and downstairs, at 8:00 and 10:30, it makes sense to have a common focus together. To tell the Godly Play version, two round green medallions (green for grass) are placed next to each other. The wooden figure of the Good Shepherd, five sheep and an enclosure for the sheep are set up on one of the green medallions.

The story begins once everything is ready. What is important to know about Godly Play is that the invitation is always to bring all of who you are and all of your questions, regardless of age. There is no need to pretend you are three or five or eight years old or to listen with anyone else's ears. You get to fully enter in as yourself, wherever you are on your spiritual journey. Storyteller and listeners all gather round. No one person more important or insightful than anyone else. Christ is the teacher. Once all are gathered. Once we are all gathered, and everything is ready, the story begins. "There was once someone who did such wonderful things and said such amazing things that people wondered who he was. Finally, they just couldn't help it. They had to ask him who he was. When they asked him who he was, he said, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know each one of the sheep by name, and they know the sound of my voice. When I take the sheep from the sheepfold, they follow me. I walk in front of the sheep to show them the way. I show them the way to the good pasture."

As the storyteller speaks these words, the Good Shepherd is slowly and intentionally moves (step-by-step) out of the enclosure, into the wide open grassy field, with the sheep (also slowly and intentionally moved) following behind. Take time to imagine that movement, to soak in the difference between an enclosure and a wide open pasture, with grass waving in the breeze. Take time to appreciate that nourishing, green, healthy grass that the sheep intently begin to munch on. Then, the Good Shepherd slowly moves to a different area of green pasture (the second green medallion) where—in the center—there is a table with a chalice and a plate. The sheep also follow until all are standing in a circle around the table. The storyteller continues, "This is the table of the Good Shepherd. Sometimes the people of the world come to the table." The storyteller begins to carefully add different figures, a wide range of people, to the circle, interspersed with the sheep, all standing with the shepherd around the table. A few more, smaller figures are added to the circle, and then the story ends with these words, "Even the children come."

As interesting as sheep are—and by all accounts, they truly are animals we can learn a lot from—the real action in this story is very simple. The sheep follow the familiar voice of the Good Shepherd out of the confined pen into the big, wide open space where they find good food, and then they follow again to gather around the common table with the Shepherd. The sheep in this story are often considered representative of people, but I wonder if they are actually just who they are, sheep. Perhaps representative of all those animals that we (the people) are to gently and tenderly care for (but so often haven't), as the Good Shepherd cares for them. Or, perhaps they are representative of all animals gathered around the table, fully in relationship with the Good Shepherd. *And sometimes the people of the world come, too.*

Randy Woodley, author, speaker, farmer involved with cultivating native plant seeds in Yamhill County, Oregon, pastor and enrolled Cherokee has said, "I think human beings are the only creatures who willfully reject their created state and therefore must make a choice to return to normalcy, which is a state of harmony." In other words, humans are the only creatures who decide whether or not they will come to the table that Christ, whom Woodley calls "the Creator-Restorer of shalom or harmony to

the world” sets. So all of creation is gathered around that communion table of right relationship, of shalom. *And sometimes the people of the world come, too.*

I have heard many people over the years say that to seek communion and shalom in Christ is simplistic or naive. I imagine you have, too. There are many voices that call out, clamoring for us to pay attention to, and one of the hardest (perhaps hardest) things to do is stay in the circle. To stay facing those who we really don't want to be a part of the fold. To stay in the circle. Anne LaMott has a new book out, *Somehow: Thoughts on Love*. She quotes Frederick Buechner wrote: “You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own.” And, she goes on to say, “This is unfortunate. I think Jesus would agree that some people are incredibly annoying. (Many days He had to lie down with a cold compress on his head.)” (p. 112-113) But the lesson of the Good Shepherd and World Communion is that today is the day to listen for the Shepherd's voice, to follow the path that leads to nourishment and widening the circle. Woodley puts it this way: “An honest, shalom- based salvation or healing is not ethereal but very much earthbound... Shalom, or harmony, is primarily about now,” Woodley says. (*Indigenous Theology and the Western Worldview*, p. 68-69)

It turns on power. What is not in the Godly Play telling are Jesus's words about laying down his life. Even as Jesus talks to his closest followers about how the sheep know and follow the Beloved voice of the Good Shepherd's, he shares that he, too, is following the Beloved's voice, and that will lead him to lay down his life. He knows that the choice is his and yet he chooses to follow that voice of love, that path, wherever it may lead. We do not all wield the same power, but we all have the power to choose that path. And while our common urge is to hang onto it, expand it, or even take it up again (even if we thought we let go of it), the Good Shepherd consistently lays power down. How do we know? Even the Good Shepherd is not at the center of the circle. The table with the nourishing food and drink are at the center.

Godly Play stories end with open-ended wondering questions: I wonder if you have ever come close to this table? I wonder where this table could really be? I wonder if the people are happy around this table? I wonder if you have ever heard the voice of the Good Shepherd?”