

Easter 4B; April 21, 2024
Grace Episcopal Church, Keswick, Virginia
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“The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away...”

~an excerpt from John 10:11-16

I don't want to be a sheep. I've always resented today's gospel for assigning us that role. As true as the metaphor might be in certain circumstances of our lives, I'd like to think that we're not generally as helpless as the flock in the story. Maybe I delude myself. Maybe it's closer to the truth to say that we have choices. We **can be** the sheep or the hired hand or the wolf or the good shepherd. We have those possibilities available to us much of the time, or at least I like to think so. On the other hand, the whole metaphor casts life into a victim-persecutor-rescuer dynamic that, on a good day, I'm hopeful we can overcome. At the very least, it's worth working toward. What if we lived in a world where the sheep and the wolf thing didn't apply? “Then you'd be dead,” would be my father's retort, were he alive today. He believed that it was human nature to hunt or be hunted, literally or figuratively. He couldn't picture a world where that wasn't so. Sometimes, I can. I think Jesus could. I think that's what the Good Shepherd is about—leading us into a different way of living. The sheep image is unfortunate in this instance because we're actually not so easily led into a different understanding of the world. It's counter-cultural to conceive of the world non-competitively. My father would add that it's either naïve or stupid to do so. I'll choose naïve or stupid then, given the alternatives.

The substance of this argument was alive and well at our dinner table during much of my youth. My father's passion about the issue was fueled by his concern that I wouldn't survive in the real world if I refused to acknowledge its competitive nature. My passion was and still is fueled by my concern that the real world won't survive if we continue to live competitively. That said, I find it just as hard as my father to live outside of a competitive model. Competition may be beneficial to a certain point. It gets the lawn mowed, if you live in a neighborhood. Carried to an extreme however, competition can be deadly. The Good Shepherd taught a different way.... and so did Ernie Edwards.

Ernie was a Master Gunnery Sergeant in the Marine Corps when I was a Second Lieutenant. About 49 years have passed since then, though I remember what I learned from him until now. We were on opposite ends of the real-world-experience spectrum when we met at The Basic School in Quantico, Virginia. I was newly commissioned and was completing initial training before being assigned an occupational specialty and duty station. Master Gunnery Sergeant Edwards was a field instructor. In 2024 women will have been ordained for almost 50 years in the Episcopal Church. In a parallel universe, about 50 years ago I was in the first co-educational class of officers' combat training in the Marine Corps. The Episcopal Church and the Marine Corps both had their hands full back then; so did Master Gunnery Sergeant Edwards.

Our final field exam was a weeklong survival event. The men and the women were sent out to separate areas along the river, each equidistant from the base, though in opposite directions from one another. Our shared mission was to find

the other team, capture or destroy it and return to the base. We had 7 days to accomplish this. Each team was assigned one field instructor. The women had Master Gunnery Sergeant Edwards.

That first night in the field we got organized. After we pitched our tents, our team made a campfire and began to form our plan. We decided to avoid encountering the men's team until the 7th day, believing that it would be too difficult to contain them, since there were 35 of us and 60 of them. This meant that we'd have to find them first, in order to avoid them, requiring us to send out a few point teams with radios. We assumed the men would also be sending out point teams, but in fact they weren't. Their strategy was to move toward us, making a lot of noise in the process, hoping we'd find them so that they could overwhelm us by numbers and strength. We discovered this on the second day and verified their location and numbers each day afterward, until the 4th night. That's the night it rained. It didn't just rain; the sky gushed water all night long. The water ran in rivers around my sleeping bag. At first light when I poked my head outside of the tent I realized we had a problem. The river was so far swollen out of its banks that it was impossible to see where the banks used to be. It was still raining. It was only Day 5. The river was between us and the base. We decided to cross the river, thinking the run-off would only make the river more treacherous as time went on. We sent our two strongest swimmers into the water with ropes attached. They fought their way across and secured a line for the rest of us to use as we crossed the river. Thirty-five women made it across, packs on our backs, rifles held above our heads with one hand, using the other hand to steady

our chest deep wade across the swirling water. Master Gunnery Sergeant Edwards was the last to cross the river. He slipped and fell as he entered the water, knocking his head on a rock in the process. Momentarily he was stunned, and in that moment the water sucked him into the swirl and began to carry him downstream. I was in the team of 6 sent back to help him. He was able to stop himself further downstream, but when we reached him, we realized he was injured. It appeared his leg was broken. Using our radio, we signaled for help, just as we saw the men's team coming our way. Master Gunnery Sergeant Edwards realized our dilemma and saw the panic in our eyes. Then in a very calm voice he said, "Ladies, you may leave me now." But we couldn't really; we couldn't leave him like that. Realizing our decision, he said, "In war, your decision would cost you your life. Leave me!" We said, almost with one voice, "This isn't war." His pained face was earnest, as he pointed toward the advancing men, saying, "Convince them." Well, we did. We asked for their help and they gave it. We got Master Gunnery Sergeant Edwards across the river, using the ropes our team had secured. Two of the men carried him on their shoulders through the swirling waters. A falling tree had injured three of their number earlier in the day. They, too, were carried across the river. On the other side we rejoined our full team. We radioed the base for transportation for our injured and waited together in what I can only describe as transforming silence, there in the pouring rain. Silently, we had decided not to fight. Three months of being pitted against one another by the media and by our instructors—the men versus the women—could the women compete—three months of fighting each

other and ourselves. But on this day, we decided the war was over. Indeed, the war was never of our own making. Others had scripted the war for us. We were just like sheep, until that day.

The following week, at graduation, Master Gunnery Sergeant Edwards was there on crutches. As we came off the podium after receiving our certificate, he handed each one of us, men and women alike, a hand-lettered card that said simply, "Remember the river. Change the world. Semper fi." An unlikely gift from a seasoned Marine, unless you know the story.

Is it possible to create a world where the sheep and the wolves live in peace? The Good Shepherd wants to lead us there. May we dare to follow.

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