

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, for a number of churches, is called *Good Shepherd Sunday*. In the Episcopal Church, we don't actually call today that, but we *do* focus on this theme in our prayers and scripture every year.

So in *The Collect of the Day*, we prayed about Jesus who is the good shepherd. We also prayed *Psalm 23*: "The LORD is my shepherd..." The *1<sup>st</sup> Letter of Peter* is addressed to Christians, saying: "For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls." And then in the *Gospel* reading, Jesus said: "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep."

Talking about *shepherds* and *sheep*...well...it can all sound...rather quaint...like harkening back to a pastoral life lived on the land...which is increasingly disappearing and a thing of the past. But actually, for Church, Jesus as the Good Shepherd is far from being something quaint. In fact...it has fundamentally shaped Church and our approach to God.

From the very beginning, *church leaders* were imagined as *shepherds*...in service to the Good Shepherd (1 Ptr 5:2). And the reason that Christians talked about being *followers* of Christ was a reference to *sheep following their shepherd*.

The clergy order of *bishops* is specifically charged with serving Jesus the Good Shepherd. And that is why every bishop has a long staff (crozier) with a hook at the end based on the shepherd's crook that was used to guide and protect their sheep. [Updated photos of bishops in the parish hall hallway]

*Priests and deacons*, under the bishop's guidance, participate in the leadership of this ministry of shepherding for congregations and communities. [but no crozier]

And *every baptized Christian* participates in the shepherding ministry of the Church with bishops, priests, and deacons, by how we attend to Jesus and each other.

So Jesus the Good Shepherd is not a peripheral idea...but basic to the revelation of God in Jesus of a shepherding God who can be trusted and calls us to shepherding with each other.

So, having said all that about the leadership and ministry of shepherding one another, it is important to be clear...that none of us...are *the Good Shepherd*. This point is made very strongly in the Gospel reading...warning of "thieves and bandits"...who presume to be the Good Shepherd. Jesus the Good Shepherd warns us to be careful—not in a paranoid way—but rightly discerning the Spirit...*among people who speak of God*. Because not everyone who speaks of God actually loves the world the way Jesus *the Good Shepherd* does.

And so, we are responsible for discerning...where Jesus is being truthfully represented...and where he is not.

The only way I know how to keep that straight...and make sure I have a chance of actually hearing *Jesus' voice amid so many voices*...is: (1) being steadfast in worship...(2) attending to scripture and especially the Gospels...(3) finding trustworthy Christian friends and writers and speakers to help us sort things out...(4) and pulling our heads out of the news and social media machines long enough to be able to hear the still small voice...of the only Good Shepherd there is.

*Jesus is not going to shout over top everyone else.  
But he has never ceased to shepherd those who harken to his voice.*