

April 30, 2023  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 2:42-47  
Psalm 23  
1 Peter 2:19-25  
John 10:1-10

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Why? Because, each year on this Sunday, we hear a portion of Jesus' Good Shepherd monologue from the Gospel of John. But, *Why?* After three Sundays of stories about the resurrected Jesus, why do we turn back the scriptural clock for talk of sheep?

Apparently my thirst for liturgical minutiae will never be sated. This time it led me down a Google rabbit hole that contained no answer to that question but did contain this surprising tidbit: in the Roman Catholic Church, Good Shepherd Sunday is also recognized as Vocations Sunday, or more elaborately, the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. This was established by Pope Paul VI in 1964, in response to the falling numbers of people becoming Roman Catholic priests, nuns, or other religious. I presume the idea behind choosing Good Shepherd Sunday was that people in those roles follow Jesus by themselves becoming shepherds of the sheep.

I also learned that Good Shepherd Sunday is also now recognized as Vocations Sunday by the Church of England and the Scottish Episcopal Church. This brings it a bit closer to home, as we might describe these traditions as parent and older sibling of our Episcopal Church in relationship to the broader Anglican Communion. Finding no history about this, I am left to presume they picked it up from the Romans.

The Episcopal Church does not seem to have come on board with this, though it might be time think about doing so. Nearly twenty years ago, while in seminary, I heard talk about a coming clergy shortage. I'm now hearing that the shortage has arrived. That long-predicted demographic shift is now compounded by additional factors, most especially the results of the pandemic. As most of you have learned, I'll be departing St. Thomas's at the end of June. Like many of my clergy colleagues across mainline traditions, I'm questioning my future in parish ministry. After I wrap up here, I'll be entering a season of discernment about that.

You'll note that I used that churchy word *discernment*. Like *vocation*, that word is often thought of in relation to ordained ministry. People who are seeking ordination are described as being in the discernment process. For them there are things like discernment retreats and discernment committees. At its best, all of that is a community endeavor that brings to the discerning individual both clarity and validation.

One of the true gifts of being here at St. Thomas's has been working with young adults discerning ordained ministry. You may remember that one of our discerners, Meg Stapleton Smith, was ordained a priest by Bishop Jeff in February. Another, Robbie Laughton, has moved to the Diocese of Virginia and is near to being ordained a transitional deacon—that is, a deacon who is on the way to becoming a priest.

That word *discernment* has been on my mind a lot lately, for that reason and even more so because of its relationship to the practice of spiritual direction. As you may remember, last June I began training in spiritual direction, as part of my stay-at-home sabbatical plan. My training wraps up this coming Friday. It occurs to me that, while I've been talking about this for a year, some of you might still be wondering exactly what spiritual direction is. There's no one standard definition, so I'll share the description I wrote as a training exercise: "Spiritual direction, also known as spiritual companionship, is a method of intentional accompaniment for people seeking to deepen their experience of the divine or to understand its meaning in their lives." What this means in practice is that, for the most part, the directee talks and the director listens, occasionally offering brief observations or questions. You all know that I like to talk, and so this has been a little bit of a struggle for me, and so it's been a good process of learning. The point here is that spiritual direction is ultimately about discernment: discernment of God's presence, discernment of Jesus' call, discernment of the Spirit's movement. All of that has implications for vocation.

To be very clear, lay people can be and are spiritual directors, and lay people can and do undertake spiritual direction. It's not just about ordained people. And my point here is not just about spiritual direction. More broadly, ongoing discernment is important for *everyone*; an ongoing sense of vocation is important for *everyone*.

Way back when I was discerning ordained ministry, my mentor asked his mentees to read a book called *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All*. That was over twenty years ago, but I still use this book with my mentees who are discerning ordained ministry, and they report that it has held up well over time. The author contrasts the sacramental priesthood—the kind I exercise through ordination—with the priesthood of all believers, the kind that all of us exercise through baptism. He observes that the sacramental priesthood is derived from the priesthood of the whole people, and that the grace to which this sacrament points is that more fundamental priesthood.<sup>1</sup> I am here to point back to you. He writes this:

Jesus' priesthood belonged to the fundamental priesthood of humanity, not to the sacramental priesthood of ancient Israel or to the later Christian Church. ... He disrupted the religious system precisely in order to reemphasize the fundamental priesthood, to draw attention away from the religious model and back to the true encounter with the HOLY in the context of ordinary human existence.<sup>2</sup>

The author continues:

What made Jesus' priesthood perfect was its authenticity and clarity. Jesus' life was so filled with TRUTH and so open to the HOLY that it admitted no falsehood and no dimming of its transparency to GOD. It becomes a kind of touchstone by which our own authenticity and clarity may be gauged. It becomes the supreme example of priesthood. It becomes the priesthood that counsels us in our own deepest encounters with the HOLY. And, therefore, it becomes our best image of the maturity toward which our own priesthood is growing and moving. Yet with Jesus as with our every other encounter with the HOLY, we find it difficult to stay aware, to remain in the PRESENCE. And, therefore, with Jesus as with every other encounter with the HOLY, we find that we must (and do) construct religious models. The priesthood of Jesus is still being worked out in the lives of the people touched and illuminated by his priesthood. To give us language to speak of it and maps to help us find our way toward it, the followers of Jesus, like all other human beings, resort to models of religious, sacramental priesthood. But the fundamental priesthood is still the key to human life in the world.<sup>3</sup>

The fundamental priesthood, I'll remind you, is the priesthood that we all share. To summarize all that, the purpose of my priesthood is to point to yours. What's important is *your* experience of the divine, and *your* response to that experience.

The collect of the day at the beginning of today's service said this: "O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads...."<sup>4</sup> Where he leads is to the redeemed and reconciled creation that we are his hands in building. To put it another way, the Good Shepherd leads us into green pastures, *and* he teaches us how to lead others there, too.

At the beginning of my sermon, I recounted asking myself this question last week: After three Sundays of stories about the resurrected Jesus, why do we turn back the scriptural clock for talk of sheep? I couldn't find any answers to that, but I have my own speculation. It goes something like this. God has made a new day, Jesus Christ is risen, and the Spirit is moving. The resurrection begs for a response, and not just from those first disciples, but also from us.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. I like the idea of also observing it as Vocations Sunday. This is a good place to note that, while Vocations Sunday may have been founded primarily to highlight "professional" vocations, the traditions observing it include at least some attention to lay vocations. I mean, really, how can they not?

As for us, I think Vocations Sunday should be a celebration. The thing is, unless this is your very first Sunday here, I can say with certain knowledge that each of you has lived a vocation as a Christian in the world. This is a gathering of priests. That is something to celebrate. Your vocation probably has changed over time, and it probably will continue to change over time. After all, the risen Christ, the Good Shepherd, is always finding new ways to call, and we are always finding new ways to follow. In this hurting world, God needs you; so discern carefully; for the vocation that only you can fulfill.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>4</sup> The 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 225.