

Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
April 21, 2024. Morning Prayer

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is Good Shepherd Sunday. In our minds, we see beautiful images as we read the 23rd Psalm -- sheep, grazing on the sunny side of a hill, cared for by a very good shepherd who will meet all their needs. This being a parable, we take comfort the words (obviously meant for all of us). And so, **we** shall not want; **we** shall fear no evil. God is our shepherd, and God's goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of **our** lives.

In the Gospel, Jesus reinforces the message and assures us, "I am the good shepherd." Who among us does not sink into these words?

The triune God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- has indeed helped me to face life challenges. However, in a practical, everyday sense, how does this work? We are currently a parish without a priest. Are we sheep without a shepherd? Do we even want to be sheep? Is this parable a model for domestic life? For parish life?

No. No, I don't think that John shares this story to inspire us to settle back and let some sort of shepherd see to our every need. To use a local analogy, I would say that this parable is less School of Management and more Divinity School. The topic is **love**.

Thanks to this love, we mere mortals have the energy and vision to do the work, to carry the message of Jesus into our lives, and into the lives of the church. Love is the fuel. A God who knows our name gives us what we need. It is God's love that will see us through to the next chapter at St. Thomas's.

The words we use for parish leaders in the Episcopal church derive from Latin. A "pastor" is a shepherd; a "rector" is a ruler; a "priest" is an elder. These word, rooted in Greco Roman traditions, molded our church, one in which the

primary clergy person leads the parish. As we go forward, we at St. Thomas's plan to hire a "Priest-in-Charge." This is the language we use to describe who we are.

During the past months, the position that has historically been the focus of parish life has been empty. And yet we continue as a functioning entity. And to be honest, I look back on the eight years when Rev. Keri Aubert was our priest, and I really wonder at all we asked her to do.

The current Vestry members will tell you that it has not been an easy road, and we know that in the future, with a half-time clergy person, lay people will have to continue our efforts. We can also report that, although challenging, the past several months have also been joyful. It has been interesting to hear a variety of voices speak on Sunday. That will continue. Our new schedule will include some Sunday Eucharists with "supply priests" and some Sunday Morning Prayer services led by parishioners.

Today I would like to touch on an area of Parish Life that will also be modified as we design a work schedule for a half-time priest. That is Pastoral Care. Here again we see a reference to the work of a pastor, a shepherd, and in our memories of church life, we see individuals seeking out help from the priest. With a half-time clergy person, we will have to design a new way. The Vestry has committed to put some new structures in place to make Pastoral Care a ministry shared by clergy and lay people. Please watch for information in the Enews.

So, on Good Shepherd Sunday we see a parable in which we can place ourselves in two positions. In our relationship to God, we are the sheep who depend on God's love. We are also shepherds in our roles as active parishioners, our roles as God's agents in world. We are apostles.

In today's Second Reading, from 1John, we are reminded, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?"

Put succinctly by St. Augustine, "Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you."

Denise Ann Terry

There were about 25 people in church today, many of whom are in the choir or on Vestry or both, so I ended on a light note --- Of, course, as usual, I am "speaking to the choir," to all of you who are heart and soul of this parish.