

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2009

Scripture: Acts 4:5-12; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Sermon: "The Conversation Continues"

### Prayer

Lord Jesus, even though we crucified you, you rose from the dead and returned to us to resume the conversation. Even though we forsook you and denied you, you continued to speak to us.

We gather here this morning, in church, as your disciples, because we have been convened. You sought us out, as a shepherd seeks lost sheep. You called us by our very own names. You summoned us to follow you as sheep follow their good shepherd. And that's why we speak to you—because you have spoken to us.

Give us open, expectant hearts. Open our ears to what you have to say to each of us. Enable us to hear your special word to each of us, and in hearing your word, grant us the grace to respond to your word when we leave church and walk into the world. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Located on the eastern wall of the sanctuary at Bethel U.C.C., the church where I was baptized and confirmed, was a stained glass window of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. There in that house of God (Beth-el) was a constant reminder of our relationship to God and God's Son. All the singing, praying and sermonizing of that church was done in a conversation with the One who stood by as our shepherd. Through church merger and preaching that took place while locomotives rumbled along the Western Maryland railroad tracks next to the church, the conversation with our Good Shepherd continued.

Jesus' claim to be "the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep" is a bold statement set dead center in John's gospel. John has just told us about Jesus' healing of the man born blind. The man's parents were questioned

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, "A Sermon Too Short," *Pulpit Resource*, May 3, 2009, 25.

and he was questioned about the healing by the Pharisees. Jesus' authority was being challenged! It was winter and the Feast of the Dedication was being celebrated. This feast celebrated the dedication of the temple which had been desecrated in 168 B.C. by the Greeks. How ironic that Jesus walking in the Temple would one day replace temple worship with his own body. The people sought to stone Jesus for his statements exerting his authority, but he escaped unharmed. His next major act would be the raising of his dead friend Lazarus.

“Evoking the figure of the shepherd in the hearing of first-century believers was more than pleasant peasant imagery: Moses was a shepherd, and so was King David. Ezekiel identified God's action toward broken and scattered people as the work of a shepherd: ‘I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed.’”<sup>2</sup>

Just as Jesus' words caused a lot of controversy when spoken long ago, his claim to be the good shepherd touches our lives this morning. His identity and relationship to all of us (his flock) cause us concern—about who we are, what we're about and to whom we belong. The relationship with Jesus is about more than stained glass windows and murals painted on church walls. We cannot domesticate the impact of the incarnation and deny the irresistible pull Jesus has on our hearts and lives.

Remember that Eastertide is a time for us to focus on the resurrection of our Lord. And we focus, not just on his resurrection but the resurrection that will take place for each of us in the future and the resurrection that can take place in our lives today. The resurrection continues. The conversation with Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Gano Lindner, “Reflections on the Lectionary—John 10:11-18,” *The Christian Century*, April 21, 2009, 21.

continues right here in worship every Sunday and throughout the week in our programs, service, and outreach. The continuing conversation takes place in our evangelism.

“Do you need somebody to invite you before you can come to church?” a person asked a member of the congregation.

“Yes, you do, but not from us. God needs to invite you. We reach out to people like you under the assumption that Jesus has already invited you to come join us on Sunday. You’re invited,” said the person in reply.

That’s a pretty good evangelical way of putting it. The conversation continues when you are here gathered with the members of the church. The sermon is a springboard for the conversation you should have with God for the rest of the week.

We are the family of God bound up in this flock. Jesus is our shepherd because God loves us so very much. We do not elect the shepherd or earn the Shepherd. We are not lost to God in this “holy” conversation, for we belong to God, “body and soul, in life and in death,” as the Heidelberg Catechism would remind us.

Jesus’ words give us an understanding about this relationship. There is a deep, mysterious and wondrous quality to this God who daily converses with us about life. Consider Jesus’ words: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”

To be Christ’s own, to move through the moments of our days, to craft our speech or care for our families or make choices about our economic lives as those who know and are known by God is neither comfortable

nor without controversy, if Jesus' own biography is any indication.

To complicate things further, we who understand ourselves to be in this relationship with the Good Shepherd must subject our self-importance and vested interests to the life and flourishing of the community from which our identity derives. Karl Barth said that there is no such thing as an individual Christian; in the English language, there is no separate singular form of the word *sheep*. In our essential belongingness, our being is bound up with the entire flock: with believers who break bread and recite prayers with us, and with those sheep whom Jesus knows and God sees, but whom we can scarcely bring ourselves to acknowledge and welcome, let alone live alongside or die to protect.<sup>3</sup>

So, how are you conversing with the Good Shepherd? Are you talking to the Lord in prayer each day? Does our language reflect the love of Christ for all people? In taking care of our families, are we showing forth the steadfast care of a shepherd who will not lose or abandon his beloved sheep? In our family discussions, do we consider the economy of the church as we reach out with our treasures to care for the world around us? Mission is at the core of the Good Shepherd's flock! These are all components of the continuing conversation.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to be willing to listen to Jesus, to be engaged in conversation with the risen Christ. In us, in your church . . . , today the talk continues.<sup>4</sup>

God is still speaking, so let us join in the holy conversation. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Lindner, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Willimon, 25.