

Grace Episcopal Church

Sunday, April 25, 2021

Homily- Elaine Taylor

I think today's homily may sound more like a parable than a sermon, because I have living in one over at my house these days. It will be a parable, not about sheep... but Sheepdogs. But to set the stage, I'd like to begin by asking you a question. If someone who really wanted your thoughtful, trustworthy answer were to ask you. "What's the purpose of the church?" how would you answer? (Leave a pause.) Some of you might say something like, "It's a place to learn about God." Maybe you would say, "It's a place where we gather to worship God." Maybe you think of church as us, the people in it, and if so, that we are a body of people who are a witness for Christ to the world. Or maybe, you would answer very personally and say something like, "It's where I'm reminded of who God is and who I am and am re-grounded in knowing both those things." Hold on to your answer, as it's probably a helpful one.

I read a statement a few years ago that changed how I think about the answer to that question. It said the church, at its core, is simply a school where we learn to love well. A school where we learn to love well.

Our readings this morning come from some of the most tender and beloved chapters in the scriptures. Psalm 23 is where we turn in difficult times to hear again the certainty in the voice of a sheep that knows it will never without the care and love of its Shepherd, even in the valley of the shadow of death. And the passage from John that expresses so beautifully the protective care of the Shepherd for the flock, as well as for each one of the sheep. "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>1</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." When I encounter scriptures like those, they prompt me to add another piece to that answer of what the church is for. It's also where we learn to trust, to really trust, we are well loved.

I would say, then, the purpose of the church is to be a place we learn to love well and to trust we are well loved. Now, with that in mind, I want to invite you into the parable I am living with at this season of my life. Since this is a parable, put on your ears to listen for how you may see yourself in the story.

I know most of you here share my love of animals...large and small. And this is a parable not about sheep, like our scriptures, but sheepdogs instead. I've been caring for "a flock" of four of them, all of whom are adjusting to life as rescue dogs, or 'used dogs' as a humorous friend of mine calls them. Two are my own recent adoptees, a sheltie and a collie, and two are a bonded pair of shelties whose owner died suddenly so they need foster care until the Sheltie rescue can re-home them. They are in a school, kind of like the church, learning how to trust they're well-loved in this new place, and they are also learning how to relate to one another in ways you might call 'learning to love well.' The key to both of those lessons is me, their shepherd for the time being.

I structure the days for this little flock of mine as a group, but I also know each one is very different from the others and loving them equally doesn't mean showing them all love in the same way. They're all learning to share me, not take each other's food or toys or beds, and to play nicely when we have chase games. To love well, you could say.

Although they have all grown familiar with my voice, like the Shepherd's, each one responds a bit differently when I speak. Maybe you'll see yourself in one of them. The little girl I'm fostering, Dakota, only needs to hear her name, no command attached, and she comes and sits at my feet and looks up with little eyes that say, "Please pet me and remind me that I'm loved and safe." Her eagerness is diminished somewhat when she is chewing things in the yard, or about to eat- well, I won't say it in church. Then it takes a firm, "Leave it..." to get her to walk away, looking sheepish. The little boy I'm fostering, her brother Brody, perks up when he hears his name but he waits to see what I'm going to ask and then does it cheerfully. Everytime. He is probably the best example of the ideal disciple and Jesus!

My own little rescue Sheltie, Toby, is what they call a reactive dog. He feels responsible for the whole world and sounds the alarm if something is in it he thinks should not be...odd things, like jet condensation trails way up in the sky, or the clicking second hand on my wall clock. When I call him, he'll usually look in my direction, at least for a moment, but if he feels something else is more important...and should be to me, too...he ignores me. Sometimes it takes a firm "Leave it!" to him, too, before he harumphs and obeys. And then there is the tall handsome collie, Moses, the retired stud dog. He'll come to me when I call his name, but just wants to tuck his big head into my hands, or lean against me, content to be close. His biggest hope is that I won't ask him to do anything that involves leaving our house and yard. You see, he became used to a very small world at the breeder's kennel and now he just wants to stay on his comfortable bed with his stuffed toy Lambie and maybe play Sheltie chase games once or twice a day in the yard.

Do you see yourself in one of those little creatures? I sure see me. But the point is, they are all in this little school at my house together learning to trust they're loved, and then to trust me enough to do what I ask. "My sheep will listen to my voice," says Jesus. And what is the main this he asks? The answer is just a few chapters later in our Gospel. It's the commandment he left them at the last supper. "Love one another as I have loved you." "You are well loved by me. Now love one another well.

You know, as I think about all the changes each of my little dogs has seen, their worlds have turned upside down in the past few month, not unlike the changes we've faced over the last year. And we're each facing new changes now as we re-enter more frequent interactions with each other. Last week Emily urged us to begin to gather and to reengage with life as guidelines permit. The truth, I think, is, that some of us will find that easier than others. Some of us will be like the little girl dog who eagerly comes to join me as soon as she gets the ok! For some, maybe this past year has tapped into our natural inclination to be cautious, like my Sheltie who is always vigilant and watching the sky for the next threatening contrail or crow! If that's us, may need to ask the Lord's help to trust as we listen and find the will to act accordingly. That includes the willingness to leave the things we've filling our time with this year, to heed the Lord's "Leave it..." Like when we reach for the remote out of habit to see what's on Netflix! We all probably have habits we'll have to break as we end this stay-at-home year.

Some of us (and I admit to being one) have secretly liked being home all the time this past year and smaller confines are just fine with us. We're the ones a bit like my big collie, very content to stay home with our stuffed Lambies. Ours then, is the challenge to find courage to leave the comfortable and get involved again, even if it means leaving what feels very nest-y and secure. Our stuffed Lambies will be just fine left at home...and we're needed out in the world. There are people to love well out there. We might be like my overly eager little foster girl who comes at the first mention of her name, even if that's

not what I was going to ask. We might jump back in to everything just because we can... and not listen for what the Shepherd might want for us, individually, to do in this new season of life.

You hear the common thread in that parable of my life with dogs, right? They each have grown familiar with my voice and they are learning to respond to it. I want to do that better with my Shepherd, Jesus, and I suspect you do, too, or you wouldn't be here this morning. These passages this morning assure us of two things: We are well loved...the beloved of God...God's children, loved even more than I love these dogs or you do yours, or we love our family and friends. That love is in the voice of our Shepherd and it's that love that can stir our courage to trust when that Voice speaks. Sometimes it may come through those inner stirring we feel, or maybe the nudge of a friend, or something we read that brings back to our mind and heart what's really important for us to be about with our lives.

This period as we re-enter might become, or maybe it already is, a stressful time for some of us. So, I'd like to suggest that loving one another well right now might include giving each other an extra measure of Grace. It's a good time to practice our lessons in this school of loving well by paying attention to what a family member, a friend, might be revealing about their stress level around re-entering life's activities. To be of good humor with each other, patient and encouraging. There is a really practical way we can do this loving well thing right now. We can ask instead of assuming. For example, you may be really ready and comfortable about eating out. One approach is you could announce that you're taking everyone out for dinner tonight. Anyone not quite comfortable yet is now in a stressful spot. Right? What if, instead, you simply asked, "How are you feeling about going out to eat?" "Is there one of our favorite places that feels safe enough we could try it first?" And honor their answer, even if it's a no to everything. They'll feel loved well, and that may be even more satisfying to both of you than going to a restaurant, or on vacation, or whatever it might be, too soon. Ask. Simple love.

What I know, and what these passages tell us, is that the Shepherd of our Souls is near and loves us enough to lay down his life and everything less than that for us. And I know the Shepherd's "voice" is there for the hearing, we just need to hone our ears to listen for it. I want to end with a story you may have heard.

A Native American and his friend were walking on Times Square in New York City when the streets were busy, noisy, and filled with people. Suddenly, the Native American said, "I hear a cricket." His friend said, "What? You must be crazy. You couldn't possibly hear a cricket in all of this noise!" "No, I'm sure of it," the Native American said, "I heard a cricket." "That's just crazy," said the friend. The Native American listened carefully for a moment, and then walked over to a big cement planter where some shrubs were growing. He looked beneath the branches, and sure enough, he located a small cricket. In amazement, the friend said, "That's incredible! You must have superhuman ears." "No," said the Native American. "My ears are no different from yours. It just depends on what you're listening for."

I'd like to close us prayerfully and ask you, if you're comfortable, to close your eyes and listen. Imagine being a sheep. It's the end of long day and the Shepherd has led you and the flock to the sheepfold. There is bed of fresh straw on the ground. The quiet of the night and the flock surrounds you. The gate of the sheepfold is closed and the shepherd is here. You're safe. You're safe. You listen as you drift off to sleep... there it is! His soft voice. His blessing being spoken over you as the day ends and you rest. He is near. "You are my beloved", he says. "Sleep, my little flock for tomorrow will be filled with new pastures to graze. Fear no evil. I'm here." There is nothing wrong with our ears...it just depends on what we're listening for. Amen