

Sunday, April 29, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "What Makes A Good Shepherd?"

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.

This is a defining characterization for many ministers.

We are taught from early seminary days that we are responsible for our flock.

We think of ourselves as shepherds.

I got into some trouble with this at my last church.

The deacons had divided the church membership into small groups which they called flocks.

A deacon was assigned to shepherd each group.

The shepherds/deacons were to pay close attention to their flock: making sure everyone was ok, noticed, attended to.

They were to alert the pastors if there were any problems that needed attention.

My first *assignment* as the new Associate Pastor was to staff the Shepherd project, coordinating assignments, providing support and training for the shepherds.

My first *conflict* as a new Associate Pastor was to hear from members of the congregation that they did not take kindly to being thought of as sheep.

We abandoned the project but it left an impression on me.

I have come to understand that the complaint was actually about individuals not wanting to be herded – or thought of as a group.

People wanted to maintain their unique relationship with the Pastor.

They didn't mind being sheep; they just wanted their own shepherd.

I understand that.

I think it defines much of the relationship that we have built here together these past 16 months.

Like a shepherd, I have grown to know each of you by name.

I have heard your stories and met your families.

I try to sense when you need attention and when you are safely grazing and can be left alone.

I know the sound of your voice-- I recognize your step on the stairs.

I believe that we are building a strong community, a safe community,
a Christian community.

This is my vision for us.

I want you to share in that vision.

I believe one of the greatest strengths of this congregation is our relationships.

Not just between you and I, but between you and the person sitting next to you, or across the aisle, or across town.

We are rooted in love – love of God reflected in love of one another.

I am going to stick with the image of the shepherd and sheep, not because I think of you as animals that I can herd, but because there is a tenderness in the metaphor that we can embrace.

My role as shepherd is part of my call. Jesus, of course is the great shepherd- I work for him.

Kate Huey wrote,

The ideal or beautiful shepherd brings abundant life for the sheep who are united not because they believe exactly the same thing but because they are loved.

Another writer identified four aspects of a good shepherd:

First, we have a shepherd that is a genuine shepherd.

This is the hallmark of a strong and vital church.

I must be genuine in all of my dealings with you, and you in turn must commit to the same thing.

Only in honesty and trust can we truly experience God's love.

Second, the Good Shepherd knows his sheep.

Again, my commitment to you is that I will come to know you for the individual that you are.

Good, clear communication helps me to understand you and your life.

Third, the Good Shepherd also includes other sheep.

My hope is that we will continue to work together to welcome new people into our church family.

To live out our tagline, "No matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

I also hope that in the future we will learn more about our brothers and sisters of different faiths and traditions.

By opening our hearts to those who make up the world at large, we are enriched.

Fourth, the shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Jesus instructed us to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul.

This Godly love is, for me, the model of how we love one another.

It must be total.

We cannot dish out compassion and empathy in teaspoon-size servings.

We are called to heap it on-to be generous.

Jesus gave his life for us – we in turn must be willing to be expansive.

Resurrection can easily be seen as an individual experience of life beyond the grave, but the Gospel reveals that it is so much more than that.

As much as it does offer personal renewal through God's life, and the promise of eternity, resurrection also calls us to be life-carriers – shepherds who, like Jesus, lay our lives down for others.

It is the hope of resurrection that makes sacrifice possible, and that gives us the strength and courage to risk loving and serving others even when it hurts or is uncomfortable.

Resurrection life is “not just a gift for personal blessing, but a powerful energy intended to flow between people, bringing life, wholeness and justice wherever it flows.”

The resurrection life we celebrate is meant to connect us with others and motivate us to seek their best, contributing in whatever way we can to a world of grace, peace, justice and love.

As we seek to live Christ's resurrected life together, our care and compassion has the potential to transform lives.

All it takes is the vision and hope, courage, commitment and the faith to follow the movement of God's Spirit,

to welcome the life that God's Spirit brings.

As we begin to live as resurrected individuals, we cannot help but connect with resurrection communities, and that in turn brings the life of resurrection to the world.

For most of us the beginning point is personal and local.

This means that, first of all, in our families and friendships, and in how we order our lives, God calls us to embody the compassion and sacrificial care of resurrection.

Any time our words and actions bring life, joy and peace to others, we share resurrection.

As we connect with one another in communities, we are able to bring life to our neighborhoods, impacting others with God's care and grace.

My hope is that, as Gandhi said, we can be the change we want to see.

We will continue to learn and practice acceptance and welcome.

We will become people of love and forgiveness.

We will contribute to causes that bring life to people we may never meet.

The life that resurrection brings cannot be contained.

It breaks out wherever it can, and those who seek to live resurrection can only follow where it leads.

When we try to contain it or control it, we only end up falling out of step with Christ.

This means that every action, word and thought can be either the reflection of resurrection, or an obstacle to making it visible.

The choice is ours – we can be Good Shepherds who care for and lay our lives down for those around us, or not.

I don't know about you, but I am weary of discord and partisan bickering.

We have the opportunity to work together to transform, not just our lives, but our world.

Last weekend I had the opportunity hear the Crescendo concert, which featured two women playing the recorder.

As I sat and listened to the music I closed my eyes and was deeply touched by the oneness of the sound.

The two recorders blended into one beautiful sound.

Later, I had the chance to speak with one of the musicians and she shared that the two of them had practiced just 4 or 5 times the previous week.

I remembered a comment that had been made a few weeks ago by someone who had had a similar experience of hearing musicians play seamlessly together.

He had said, "That's what a congregation should be like. Each person playing their own part, but one harmonious sound being produced."

19th century priest Jean Baptiste Lacordaire said, "We are leaves of one branch, the drops of one sea, the flowers of one garden."

I would add that we are sheep of one flock, each distinct and unique, known and loved by our shepherd.

We are called to play our part, to be ourselves, to bring our unique gifts and talents to the flock, all with the goal of living out our faith in the world.

As we head into our 267th annual meeting today, let us be aware of those who came before us, those who are currently in our midst, and those who have yet to come.

Let us commit ourselves to living out the promise of Christ's resurrection here in our lives this day for the good of the whole flock.