

Easter IV – April 26, 2015
John 10:11-18

**“With great respect and love, I welcome you all,
 with all my heart.”**

A sermon preached by Sue Cook at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, Washington.

It has been quite some journey that I have been on. This life of mine appears to be one of continual change. Oh there are periods of time when I sit or stand, walk or trot pretty much like any other humanoid...but in truth – just between you and me, lately I seem to have walked around the world only to find myself back where I started.

While preparing for this sermon, I prayed to be emptied of all obstacles – real and imagined – that might blind me, and thus you, to the gifts of insight and inspiration we might share in this brief time we have together.

Prone to distraction as I am, I also re-read a thank-you note perched in front of my monitor...I received this recently from my daughter. Ostensibly she writes that the blouse I chose for her birthday gift was a great success. She goes on to express dis-belief that she is now 44 and I almost 71 years of age. “My heart still feels like the child holding your hand and collecting sea glass together; or baking cookies; or, singing to Helen Reddy driving down the road in our Red & White VW bus. She thanked me for my continued love, guidance, humor and listening ear. “It means the world to me Mama and to my children as well. They too think the world of you.”

I share these loving words, not for self-congratulatory reasons, but more in keeping with the spirit of today’s Gospel.

In John’s text he captures a familiar image of Christ as the good Shepherd; a shepherd who knows his own flock and a flock who knows him as well. He goes onto to write that Christ has other “sheep that belong to this fold. And that he must bring them also, and they will listen to his voice. ‘So there will be one flock, one shepherd.’

I must say that the part about Christ knowing his flock and the flock knowing him is as new to me as if I were reading it while the ink was still dripping from the tip of John’s quill. How could that be? He knows me and I in turn recognize him for who he is to me. Really?

This concept grabs hold of me, like an insistent child pulling on their mother’s sleeve. The words and images won’t let go of me until I pay some attention to them.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes in *The Preaching Life* about the challenges of creating sermons for this particular Sunday. “While, she writes, “that it makes for a good one, the preacher must deal with the congregation’s likeness to sheep, which does not always sit well, since most of us think of sheep as slobbering, untidy, dumb animals who exist only to be shaved and slaughtered.”

She goes on in one of her sermons to tell us some things she learned about sheep. “Imagine my delight, she writes, “when I discovered last Tuesday that someone I know actually grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest and that according to him sheep are not dumb at all. It is cattle ranchers who are responsible for spreading that ugly rumor and all because sheep do not behave like cows. According to her friend: “Cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips - but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led.” “You push cows”, her friend said, “but you lead

sheep and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first – namely their shepherd – who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.”

pparently sheep tend to grow fond of their shepherds. It never ceased to amaze Taylor’s friend that as a kid he could walk right through a sleeping flock without disturbing a single one of them, while a stranger could not step foot in the fold with causing pandemonium. Sheep seem to consider their shepherd a part of the family, and the relationship that grows between the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to. A good shepherd learns to distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure, while the sheep learn that a cluck of the tongue means food, or a two-note song means that it is time to go home.

I try to bring this ancient image of a bearded Shepherd leading his bleating flock into something more 21st Century.

Last week while meandering – sheep like - through the world according to Facebook, a link appeared that led me on a magical journey.

Imagine a large light and airy room – perhaps a space normally used for ballet rehearsals – my memory is that the filming is done in muted shades of grey and white, with just hints of color here and there. It is as though I have happened onto a French movie set.

A young child, maybe 3 or 4 years of age, is having a soft cloth gently tied over her eyes. It would appear she might be about to play blind man’s bluff.

The camera then pans to a line-up of women, 8 to 10 perhaps, all seem to be close to 30-something in age. There is a general “sameness” about them I should add. They are all Caucasian, rather medium to slender in body type, and very pleasant to the viewers’ eye.

The camera scans their faces - their smiles are genuine. I’m thinking these are not actors, when the first child cautiously approaches the line-up and extends her hands to touch the first woman – gingerly, shyly, without guile. First her fingers flutter lightly onto the woman’s hands and then immediately they pull up towards her face; finally, the tips of her fingers land briefly on the woman’s hair.

She pulls back, shakes her head ever so slightly and then moves on to the next woman. In this way the youngster continues searching; searching for the true one who she hopes to find in this flock of would-be mothers.

Will she, and the other youngsters who follow, be able to successfully complete this task? One discerns the question being posed by this exercise as we see each of the “true” mother’s faces. Each shows a crinkle of worry on her brow; concern registering around the eyes and mouth – a darting look flashes towards the other women currently being touched by her child. Her inner dialogue, her concerns are evident – Perhaps this child will not know her and will mistakenly choose one of the other mothers as her own.

There are no words – not really – to describe the intense feelings she conveys in this brief moment we witness. What is so moving about this scene is that it is repeated again and again. Each

child, in turn, goes from one woman to the next, touching, pausing ever so briefly, and then knowingly indicating by his or her reaction that, 'Not this one. I've not found my Mother yet'. The search continues until they each eventually connect with their own mother.

When this re-union occurs, the joy evidenced on both of their faces is one of complete and total bliss; an all- encompassing embrace follows.

"I know my own and my own know me," rings through my ears as I watched this touching footage. John's quote adamantly captures the promise of this teacher, this rabbi, this rogue Messiah whom we know as Jesus of Nazareth, the risen Christ. This promise, given over 2000 years ago, is lyrical; truly it is meant to embrace the heart and mind of anyone who hears or reads of it.

It is all well and good, if the rabbi, the teacher, the risen Christ, knows those in his flock, but what about those who do not "know" *him* as *their* teacher. In fact, they may only know about him through the actions of some flawed members, or questionable Church doctrines, or equally misguided leaders and thus, would just as soon run in the opposite direction than join up with one of His holy flocks.

Mine was a rude awakening when in my late teens and early 20's, I could no longer continue on the spiritual path laid out by the Catholic Church.

There were so many incidences of entire groups of individuals being judged as not acceptable in the eyes of the Vatican that I could not in good conscience continue to profess my belief in the institution. I found myself quite troubled. My entire life had been colored and shaped by the community of my church, by its sacraments and by a doctrine that among other outrageous claims declared I was blessed to be a member of the one and only *true* Church. Where do you go from there?...hell apparently.

It was from this place that I began searching about for other flocks to align myself with. First stop - the local Episcopal church ...familiar liturgy, liberal politics, and great potlucks, while still far enough away from the suffocating Papacy to take in some fresh air.

In time, I had to leave this group as well....who knew the country club wife in me would evolve into a 70's Authority Questioning Berkeley rabble rouser? For the next few years I bounced around a wide range of sometimes edgy and sometimes ancient spiritually based groups.

Finally, exhausted from my efforts to fit into other folds, I fell into the world of Eastern based meditation. This seemed to really feed my spirit, and my need for something that included the familiar...incense, sacred language, costumes, daily liturgy, chanting, and of course, great potlucks.

All of these elements brought me more deeply into an inner world that gave me joy and peace. I found in time that the philosophy that stated simply, "See God in One Another" and "Thou Art That", healed many of the deep scars left from certain elements of my Christian experience. I also learned that the Guru reportedly will do whatever is required to assist their devotees in their desire to be awakened into God's love – no matter where or how long the journey takes. I now translate the word Guru to include Shepherd or Christ and the word devotee to include sheep or Christ's follower.

In Palestine today it is possible to witness a scene that Jesus almost certainly witnessed two thousand years ago, that of Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures they have grazed during the day. Often those flocks will end up at the same watering hole around dusk, so that they get all mixed up together – eight or nine small flocks turning into a convention of thirsty sheep. Their shepherds do not worry about the mix-up, however. When it is time to go home, each one issues his or her own distinctive call – a special trill or whistle, a particular tune on a particular reed pipe, and that shepherd's sheep withdraw from the crowd to follow their shepherd home. They know whom they belong to; they know their shepherd's choice and it is the only one they will follow.

Turn around, turn around and 30+ years have passed. Remember those sheep and their uncanny ability to recognize their own Shepherd and their flock? Well one day I wandered into this little watering hole of St Paul's and fell into a sacred flock almost as familiar as the one I was born into.

The call of the priest's voice, the rhythm of the chants, the invitation to share in the bread and wine always laid out on the table before us, all tell me I am home. This is truly my flock and Christ is truly my Shepherd.