

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

Austin, Texas

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

January 29, 2012

Annual Parish Meeting, Matthew 18:12-14

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. Amen.

Good morning!

We are The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd – Good Shepherd Episcopal School – and today’s Gospel lesson is the story of a good shepherd. In Jesus’s teaching, this shepherd has one hundred sheep on the mountainside until, predictably, one goes astray. However, the good shepherd does not lose heart, but goes after that one sheep, finds that lost sheep, and celebrates upon its return. “So it is **not** the will of your Father in heaven that [*even one*] of these little ones should be lost” (Matthew 18:14).

So it is, too, in the Gospel of John, when Jesus declares, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:14-16)...*I know my own, and my own know me...*

So if these are the *good* guys, what then of the *other* sheep and those *other* shepherds? Well, there is another story that we might tell...

...for you see, it came to pass in those days that several shepherds and a small flock of hungry sheep found a thicket on the side of a lovely mountain. The flock said to the shepherds, “We see potential here. If you will keep the wolves away and care for us, we will clear this land. We will graze there, beyond that brushy tree, and we will open this thicket into a pasture where other sheep will want to come and to live, to be fed and to share their wool, to grow old and to leave their lambs to raise their lambs’ lambs, *here*. All around this mountain, flocks will hear of our pasture, even to the mountains beyond those that we can see.”

The shepherds looked at one another and nodded, and they agreed to keep away the wolves and to care for the sheep.

The sheep and the shepherds kept their promises. Within only a few seasons, the thicket had indeed become a pasture, and their small flock grew. The growing flock took pride in their fields. When a rock would fall from the surrounding hillside, these good sheep would nudge the stones with their noses, kick even the pebbles with their hooves, and, with the help of the shepherds and their crooks, they kept clear the good pasture they had inherited and that they loved.

Time passed. Sheep and shepherds came, and sheep and shepherds went.

After a long day of tending the flock, a shepherd counted the sheep: ninety-nine. Setting down his cocktail, a second shepherd stood: “Let me count,” ...but again: ninety-nine. Wiping

his supper from his chin, a third shepherd said to all those at the table, “Look, we’ve still got ninety-nine, and we barely knew that one, loner sheep: hardly *ever* saw her around. Let her go, and you: come back to the table and finish your supper.” And the shepherds did as the third shepherd counseled.

Scarcely a week later, a shepherd counted the flock as he began his morning chores: eighty-six. Setting down his coffee, a second shepherd stood: “Let me count,”...but again: eighty-six. Wiping his breakfast from his chin, a third shepherd said to his friends, “Look, we’ve still got eighty-six, and those thirteen? They were trouble-makers. We never liked them anyway, but that pitiful shepherd – the one down in the valley – *she* will be thrilled to have them. She’ll take care of them as though they were her own. Let them go, and you: come down off of that high horse and finish your breakfast.” And the shepherds did as the third shepherd counseled.

Now, while the shepherds ate their breakfast, two hungry sheep at the back of the pasture noticed that a weed had sprung up along the side of the mountain. They remembered their grandfather had spoken of such weeds. He would tell stories about how *his* generation would eat those weeds – eat them by the wagon load – until, finally, their teeth had been sharpened, their throats had grown tough, and they had eaten all of those weeds right out of the pasture. The two hungry sheep took a bite of the thick stalk, but the weed *was* rough, and it tasted bad, so they decided they would encourage some other sheep to graze in that corner of the field.

Before long, that one weed had become a bush, and the next two sheep who happened upon it decided that they, too, would leave the growing mess for some other sheep to clear.

Years passed, and the bush grew into a thicket, and the thicket grew to cover more than a quarter of their field. Of the thirty-six sheep who still grazed there – and, hey, in those days thirty-six wasn’t so bad, and, besides, most sheep were grateful just to have a field at all! – well, some of the sheep began to feel crowded and embarrassed by their shrinking pasture. Finally, one of the lambs of the flock looked at the wide, wild thicket, and reported to a group his friends, “You know, I hear that flock up-mountain has cleared a beautiful pasture: no rocks, no weeds, no wolves – there’s even a crisp, blue creek that runs right through the place. I say we go check it out. It’ll take ‘em a week before they even notice we’re gone, and once they do, *they’ll understand*: what we need isn’t even here. How could they blame us?”

And while the shepherds and the small flock slept, the lambs left.

Of course, ours here at the corner of Windsor and Exposition is a complicated pasture, for here we are both sheep and shepherd...*all of us: sheep and shepherd*. Now, the *good* sheep are fed as they ready the pasture for other sheep to feed. Giving away full coats of wool makes fuller their own coat, and the good sheep stay close and keep watch on the flock.

And, Lord have mercy, this parish enjoys some really, really good sheep. People who have given and given and given, given their heart and their hope and their *everything* for this church family. Those good sheep have kept watch over you and me, making sure that our fields, always, have remained green.

Now, the good shepherds, they, too, stay close, and they partner with neighboring rams to keep their field safe for the little lambs to grow strong and healthy. The good shepherds keep all the sheep from the bramble, and lifting the frail sheep into their arms, the good shepherds care for those who can no longer keep up with the flock.

And, Lord have mercy, we have some really, really good shepherds. People who lead by example as they set the altar on Saturday mornings; who demonstrate their convictions as they keep company with the homeless on Tuesdays; who live with integrity in their service on the Vestry, all as they call us to become more than we have been. Yes, those good shepherds have set *themselves* in the thorns, just to keep us safe.

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd has never been overrun with *bad* sheep and *bad* shepherds. No, worse than apostasy, we have given ourselves to *apathy*; worse than malevolence, we have given ourselves to *mediocrity*; worse than squalor, we have given ourselves to *sloth*. Look around this campus: the fact is, this very building reflects our priorities: how many of us live in a home with a boarded window?

Now, recognize: that the thicket is the distraction in the parable, and not the problem...*the thicket is the distraction in the parable, and not the problem*. That is, the thicket is a consequence: a consequence of the flock's complacency and an indictment of their community, **sheep and shepherd, shepherd and sheep**. What do these cracked walls say about who we are and who we declare God to be?...we better believe that it makes a difference. What does it say about us as a parish family that the children of our school do not have enough sinks and toilets to sustain our education program? And how long have we allowed those same good sheep and those same good shepherds to clear our weeds, and tend our youth, and visit our sick, and feed our hungry, so that we could remain comfortable and undisturbed.

Well, people of God, those days of The Episcopal Church of the Mediocre Shepherds and the Politely Interested Sheep are ending.

We – all of us – are confronting the weeds filling this pasture: from cramped classrooms to crummy kitchens. And we begin work on these thickets not for hubris, but as a declaration that God asks for the best of us, and as a parish family, we will give to God and to one another nothing less.

Now, consider: we've gone from two fathers regularly participating in pre-school Sunday School leadership to thirty-four...from two, to thirty-four. That's not more effective maintenance of a dying Children's Ministry program, that's *transformation*.

Now imagine if that were true of our Senior Ministry, that every senior member of this congregation would know that they were loved, and remembered, and kept in prayer, because their parish family brought church to them – every week! – as just a few years ago – every week – they would faithfully come to church. Imagine a new Parish Life Center that provided daily programming for seniors, to keep them healthy, connected, and vital, that in the company of old friends, every day could again be encountered as the holy gift that it is. All their lives long.

Imagine teenagers choosing to gather on our campus, in a community where they were safe to ask questions, safe to be awkward, safe to dream big dreams about their future.

Imagine ten and fifteen and twenty small groups of moms and caregivers, of men and women, meeting daily to study scripture, to support one another, to share hurts and hopes, and to

be partners in this complicated, Twenty-First Century American pasture where we cannot do it alone: no one – not one of us – can do this alone.

Imagine a satellite campus of this parish family at the foot of downtown, where rather than asking the needy to come all the way to us, that we would go to where that need is, where rather than only writing a check, we would hold a hand.

This endeavor has not been and will never be about bricks and mortar: it's about brothers and sisters, and fathers and mothers, and strangers and neighbors...this endeavor is about the mission of Jesus Christ, a mission that has this community of the Good Shepherd as its instrument. And if it is the will of our Father in heaven that not even one sheep would be lost from our flock, then we must seek out our brothers and our sisters in Christ with the same urgent love we cling to our own limbs: our feet and our hands. For we are not whole, *unless we are whole*. In this flock, every sheep matters...every sheep counts...every sheep a child of God...and every one of us has the great joy to shepherd these that we love, these who love us.

Eventually, one curious sheep said to the shepherds, "Did we lose some of the flock?" The few shepherds who were left counted the remaining sheep, nodded their heads, and suggested, "You know, I believe we did."

For some time, a few sheep had been grazing a corner of the thicket. While they had not yet developed a taste for the weeds, their throats were already tough and their teeth, sharp. Upon hearing the news of the lambs' loss, one of these sheep stepped away from the weed, cleared his throat, and said in a rough voice, "This flock has lost its last sheep. This was my mother's pasture – my grandfather's field – and I will not leave it unattended."

Another of the flock said to the shepherds, "We see potential here. If you will keep the wolves away and care for us, we will clear this land. We will again graze there, beyond that brushy tree, and we will open this thicket into a pasture where other sheep will want to come and to live, to be fed and to share their wool, to grow old and to leave their lambs to raise their lambs' lambs, *here*. Yes: all around this mountain, flocks will hear of our pasture, even to the mountains beyond those that we can see. And never again – *never again* – will a thicket fill this field."

Time passed. More and more sheep came, and more and more shepherds came, and the flock and the pasture grew, the pasture green and lush and full...and *good*.