



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

One Flock The Fourth Sunday of Easter 4/25/2021

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

I've become aware that since becoming a dad, my sermons are occasionally sprinkled with stories about my girls. And I apologize if I go to that, well, a bit too often. But I have to tell you, I am really starting to appreciate why Jesus says in the gospels over and over in different ways that we need to come like children. We need to come like children to the gospel because they can help us see things with fresh eyes. They have this sense of wonder and innocence about them. They can even help us see with the eyes of God.

Which brings me to something they did about a year and a half ago. They were just turning three, in that kind of two-year-old to three-year-old range and they just had started playing with the girl next door, same age. And for this story to make sense you should probably know that our girls don't have a mom. They actually have two dads and I'm Dad and Joe is Daddy, in case you're wondering how we work that out.

But anyway, when they go next door to play with their friend over there, their friend of course, calls her mom, Mommy, as you might expect. And I suppose at that age, that young age, our girls just assumed that that was her name. So they started calling her Mommy as well. And they'd run over and give her a hug when she came out. And it's one of those things, it was just so precious, you know? Do we need to spoil that? Do I need to try to explain that to them? No, we didn't. And if you saw the smile on our neighbor's face, it was fine. We figured they'll figure it out in time.

But it didn't end there. Later that week I'm walking the girls down the street to the park. And they see a woman a few doors down, out in front, gardening. And they're like, hi Mommy. Hi Mommy. She has this smile on her face and, okay, what's that all about? We get down to the park and there's another person there. She's out for a walk, I guess, whatever, a total stranger and the girls run over to her and give her a hug and say, hi, Mommy. And again, I have this, like, should I put a stop to this?

But, again, I saw the look on that woman's face, total stranger, and she just went with it. She was in the moment she kneels down and gives them a big hug. And it hit me for a brief period in their young life, in that one or two-week period

when they were doing this, they saw a world where every woman could be their mom. And it struck me that they had found in their sort of innocence, they had found a way to see the world as God does - as one family, as one people, one flock.

Mother Theresa used to say that the cause of the world's problems is that we have forgotten that we belong to one another. And that is in fact, the dream of God, that we would be one, that we would be one. As the Father and I are one, that we would be one. That is the place where the Good Shepherd is leading us. It is the mission of reconciliation to which we are all called. And so this reconciliation is far bigger than the way we use it in everyday conversation. It's much more than settling an argument or putting a difference or a disagreement behind you. It's nothing less than the great commandment made real. It's the journey that we could take towards a shared future where the line between where my needs end and your needs begin can no longer be drawn because they overlap so perfectly.

And as our gospel lesson reminds us, and as the nightly news reminds us too often, we are not there yet. We sheep, we are scattered in all kinds of ways. We are divided over our politics, over questions of science and health, over issues of injustice, we keep ourselves branded and labeled by what we do and how much we make, where we shop, what we wear, how much education we have, what schools our kids got into. We keep ourselves divided in Red states and Blue states, urban versus suburban, and as I've come to notice since moving here to Michigan, whether you live on the East Side or the West Side.

It's ironic because you know, sheep are not known for their intelligence or their creativity, are they? Yet, we are amazingly inventive at finding new ways to find our identity in our divisions. At creating a sense of who we are by who we are not, who we are better than, who we are against.

So what keeps us from answering the good Shepherd's call? Hearing today's gospel, you might think the problem here is the wolf. After all, it says right here in the text, it's the wolf that scatters us. And is it not the wolves of our lives, our fears, our insecurities, our deep need to be accepted and affirmed and loved, aren't those the things that nip at our heels, that drive us to seek safety in separate tribes and false identities? That scatter us into a safe little cul de sacs where we huddle with people that look like us and think like us. Isn't it the wolves of our lives that drive us to keep things safe and predictable, comfortable and controlled, even if it means becoming isolated and alone?

So yes, we might want to blame the wolf. But the contrast Jesus sets up in the story, the tension in this gospel really isn't about the wolf. The wolf is presented here as kind of just a fact of life, suffering in death, fear, and doubt. That's what it means to be human. The wolf is just being the wolf. The problem in today's gospel, if not the challenge for our entire journey of faith, is who we will turn to.

Who will we place our trust in? When we hear the wolves coming, when we hear the howl of our fears and anxieties about the future coming closer, who will we turn to for safety and protection?

The problem as I hear it today isn't the wolf. It's our reliance on hired hands. It's our habit of turning to false pretenders who don't know us, who don't care about us, who are really just in this for themselves. Yet we keep going back to them. Hired hands are basically all of those that we turn to for safety and security and affirmation and love that are not the good shepherd. Hired hands like consumerism that drives us to want the newest and the greatest, the biggest and the fastest, the latest fashions, the hottest hairstyles, the most square footage, all of which are sold to us sheep, not because of their great features, but for the ways they promise to make us feel.

Or how about the hired hands that we turn to when we want to forget our fears? Overeating, overdrinking, overspending, endlessly bingeing Netflix, or the busyness and overworking and perfectionism we try to turn to trying to outrun our fears. And then there's the hired hands of social media, right? Where sophisticated algorithms that we're now discovering are really good at keeping us coming back for more, forever chasing that endorphin rush we get when somebody likes our post. And yeah, those little pops of affirmation, they are kind of real. They feel good in the moment don't they? But as the studies are now showing us, the only real lasting impact is to make us more self-absorbed, more isolated and more depressed. Because no matter how hard we try, no matter how we doctor up our lives for public consumption, we never seem to measure up. There's always somebody out there doing it bigger and doing it better.

Or how about the hired hands of cable news and online echo chambers that offer us scared sheep, safe media bubbles, right? Where everyone agrees with us, where our fears are amplified in endless grievances, more conspiracies, more outrageous, more vilifying, all of which keeps us huddled together, entrenched in our heart and opinions and an unwillingness to listen to others.

No, the problem isn't the wolf. But it's our addiction to hired hands who make millions, if not billions, feeding us a steady diet of fear and scarcity and scapegoating, all of which have the same basic message that we aren't good enough, that we don't have enough, and that there is always someone out there trying to get us. It's exhausting, isn't it, to even consider this, it was exhausting to write this sermon. Yet it's what daily life in America has become. It's what passes for normal, apparently. And we have the rising rates of depression and addiction and suicide and divorce and divisions and unhappiness and hopelessness to show for it, don't we?

All of it contributing to a world where this idea that we belong to one another, it's not even a distant memory, but it's something left for the imagination of children. This is why I think that today's gospel is such good news and why this

image of the good shepherd is so endearing, so enduring. Because I think deep down, I think we know that our hired hands will eventually fail us. I think we know that the day will finally come when we have had enough.

And so we need to know that we too, like the prodigal son can come home, can come crawling home one day empty, exhausted. And we want to know that the good shepherd will be waiting for us, ready for us to fall into His waiting arms. Where we can finally relax, finally be ourselves. Where we don't have to be perfect. We don't have to pretend anymore. We don't have to be afraid. We don't have to be alone because the wolves no longer have teeth and we can just be sheep. And in the arms of the Good Shepherd, that's enough.

We read it during this Easter season every year, I think so that we might see it through the lens of the resurrection and be reminded that it's never too late, no matter how far we might stray in life, no matter how lost we might feel, no matter how many hired hands we've wasted our time and our money on, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us, who knows us each by name will always be there, will always be there for us, and will never stop looking for us until He finds every last one of us and the day comes where we are once more, one people, one flock, and we dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Can you hear Him calling? Can you hear Him calling you by name?