

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year 'A': Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a; 51-60, Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25;
John 10:1-10

Title: Are You Squared Away?

I suspect that few among us have not had the experience of seeing Christ depicted in a stained glass window standing in the midst of a sheepfold caring for and holding a lamb. Christ as Shepherd of the flock is a common image.

God as shepherd; Christ as shepherd is a powerful image, especially when one begins to learn a little bit about the relationship that exist between an actual shepherd and the actual sheep that the shepherd cares for.

I once read an article by a fellow wherein he described an experience that he had when on a visit to the Holy Land. In that piece he told how early one morning, not far from Bethlehem, he witnessed a scene in which two modern-day shepherds had evidently spent the night together along with, of course, their flocks. The author supposed that maybe they had done so for the benefit of one another's company or maybe for reasons of safety. But for whatever reason the consequence was that during the night the two flocks had intermingled. The sheep from the two flocks had gotten all mixed up. However, what the visitor observed was that upon rising one of the shepherds stood off at a distance from the sheep and began to call. First one came to him. Then another. One by one until his entire flock had surrounded him. And that is how the two flocks began their day each with their respective shepherd.

Folk who know sheep know that this scene is not unusual. The point take is that sheep know the voice of their master.

This is a characteristic of the relationship between shepherd and sheep. Sheep know the voice of the one they have come to trust and rely on and they will respond to no other. In fact, the trust that sheep have in their shepherd is near absolute and unshakable. Sheep will follow their shepherd anywhere, even in the face of potential hazards or danger.

Another thing that people who are familiar with sheep are unanimous in their opinion is that sheep are not very bright. I guess you could say that one of the redeeming things about sheep is that they are at least smart enough to know whom they belong and in whom they can trust.

While engaging this gospel text wherein Jesus likens himself to the Good Shepherd and even the gateway to all things good, it is probably helpful to note something about the

shepherd as well as the sheep. And that is, to be a good shepherd one must know something about what sheep need to thrive and survive. And the shepherd must know something of what in the environment represents a danger, and how to combat that danger, and how to steer clear of it.

Sheep come to trust their shepherd to lead them to places where the grass is good, and the water is clean, and where it is safe.

The point here is not a mystery. We Christians are called into a relationship with Jesus wherein we listen to his voice and know him to be to be trustworthy. This too is implicit in the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd.

But there is an additional characteristic of Jesus -- one additional thing about his relationship to us and us to him -- a thing that may or may not be present in the relationship between an actual shepherd and sheep of the four-legged variety and that is that Jesus loves us.

Now maybe shepherds do what shepherds do because they love sheep, but based on what little I know of sheep I kind of doubt it. I suspect that most shepherds do what shepherds do because they are paid to do it, or it's all they know to do, or it's what their father's did. But I suspect most probably don't do it out of a love for these oft described dumb, irritating, smelly animals.

But irrespective of motivation, each night a shepherd corrals his charges into the sheepfold. A pen. A place of temporary refuge free from peril. Free from danger. Free from distress. In other words, the good shepherd gets his charges squared away for the night.

Jim Stovall wrote a book entitled, *You Don't Have To Be Blind To See*. In his book he describes how when he was a boy the condition of Juvenile Macular Degeneration began to steal away his eyesight. By the time he reached adulthood, Jim was totally blind. But he was not one to let his blindness overtake him. He even attended college - although he had to work twice as hard to earn the same grades as his sighted peers.

After a late night of studying, it seems that Jim would often take a break by walking through the dorm and, more often than not, he would stop by and visit the maintenance man who also lived in the dorm. The maintenance man's name, no relation to our native son and former president, was Jimmy Carter.

Jimmy Carter, the maintenance man, took great pride in his work and he expected those around him to do so as well. He often asked Stovall this question: "Jim," he would say, "Are you squared away?" By that he meant, "Are you ready for the test? Have you studied hard enough? Is the term paper the best it can be? Are you giving it your best effort? All of this was behind the question, "Are you squared away?"

One day, Jimmy Carter surprised Jim the student by inviting him into his supply room. The walls were plastered with photos of past students. Carter proudly pointed to certain young men and described how successful they were. Then he said to Jim, "You know son, they were no better or worse than you. They just got themselves squared away."

Jim eventually graduated with honors and went on to become a successful stockbroker and founded his own cable network company. For his work in media he even earned an Emmy and he also became a much sought after motivational speaker.

Years later, Jim visited his old friend Jimmy Carter in a nursing home. He visited for a while in the sitting room until a nurse came in to say that it was time for Mr. Carter to go back to his room. But as she prepared to wheel him back to his room, she turned to Jim and said, "You know," Mr. Stovall, "you made it onto his wall."

Of all the awards and honors and success that Jim Stovall ever earned, he said that nothing meant as much to him as making Mr. Carter's wall.

Dear ones, Jesus desires nothing more than we make the gallery of those who hear his voice and trust him to lead us to places where we can be whole.

Jesus desires that we be a part of his sheepfold and he calls us out of love. And if we'll but listen, we'll constantly hear him sometimes asking, "Are you squared away?"

Are you going in the right direction? Any danger ahead we need to be aware of? Any wolves out there in sheep's clothing? Are there any voices you need to turn off?

Things such that maybe young people might especially consider: Are there any TV shows that need not be watched? Is there any music that needs not be listened to? Any friends that need not be hung out with? Any web sites best not visited? Any violence oriented video games best left in the box?

And for all of us: Are there any tendencies to self-righteousness that need to be squelched? Any tendency to say along with Pharisee, "Oh Lord, I am so glad that I am not a sinner like that other person?"

Do I have any tendency to a pride or prejudice which may leave me vulnerable to not seeing the log in my own eye?

Any ways that I prop myself up, but do so at the expense of my neighbor?

Any tendency to self-sufficiency such that I might imagine I don't need God.

Any tendency to make hold on to self-doubt as if it were my best friend?

Any tendency to withhold compassion when compassion is due? Any tendency to withhold that which ought to be shared?

Any tendency to view the world through the lens of scarcity rather than the reality of the abundance that surrounds us?... and so then to squander more than I need.

Any tendency to imagine that rather than the earth circling the sun, the universe revolves around me?

Any tendency to judge, forgetting that I too am judged?

Any prayers that need praying that have gone neglected?

Any relationship that needs healing but which either pride, fear, or self-righteousness has kept me from pursuing?

Any tendency at all, by whatever name, that keeps me from being in communion with God and my neighbor? Is there anything in my life that tends to make me less than I might be were I to let that thing go? In other words, is there anything in my life that keeps me from being squared away?

Any stuff in my life that were Jesus the Shepherd present he would just take that Shepherd's crook and beat that thing to pieces. And then would he, because he is the GOOD shepherd, take that shepherd's crook and pull me a little closer to him because he loves me, and because he cares for me, and because he wants to protect me – largely from myself, and because his great desire is that I be whole?

Remember that stained glass window of Jesus lovingly holding the lamb? We yearn for that comfort. We yearn to be in that sheepfold. But like the country song says, we oh so often are tempted to look for love in all the wrong places; and not just to look for love in all the wrong places but also our joy, our peace, happiness, and contentment in many of the wrong places.

So, maybe the question of the hour is, “Are you squared away?” My prayer for me and my prayer for you is that we might take time in the busy-ness of our lives to ask ourselves that same question: Am I squared away? And that we might be intentional about listening for that voice that calls us to the sheepfold where there is peace and harmony with God and with our neighbor. Not so much because those things - known and unknown, done and left undone - leave us vulnerable to judgement. But rather because to continue in them represents an existential impediment to the newness of life that God so much desires and calls us to. A newness of life that lives in that place where God’s peace is known and where there is connectedness with God, and with creation, and with one another and within our own souls. Amen.