St Brendan's
April 25, 2021
John 10: 11-18
4th Easter
A sermon given by Rev. Emily Blair Stribling

Recently Elaine wrote me and reminded me that the Sunday I was to preach at St Brendan's was not only Good Shepherd Sunday but also Earth Day. If I liked, she wrote, I could either use the lectionary readings for today or I could pick others that were more evocative of Earth Day. I assured her the lectionary readings would be just fine. I mean we read the 23rd Psalm in which the *Lord is my shepherd*, and our gospel reading is about Jesus as the Shepherd of the sheep. You see, I grew up on a farm and have spent the better part of my life farming and to be honest, I can't separate the sheep from Earth Day.

In her poem, Here in the Psalm, Sallie Fisher writes: "*I am a sheep and I like it because the grass I lie down in feels good and the still waters are restful and right there if I'm thirsty."* Do you see what I mean? The sheep need the grass to be good and the water pure and drinkable or they won't survive. We need the earth to be good and the water pure and drinkable or we will not survive. As the saying goes, *"The earth doesn't need us. We need the earth."*

Fisher goes on to say, *"and though some valleys are very chilly there is a long rod that prods me so I direct my hooves the right way"* Like the sheep we too need some prodding to find the right way …that is,, of course, what Jesus means by the way of love.

But the way of love isn't always easy, is it. It isn't easy when we feel frightened or threatened. It isn't easy when we are in pain or in despair. It isn't easy when we are angry or frustrated. It isn't easy when we grieve or experience loss. It isn't easy when we see our land desecrated in the name of greed and profit. It certainly hasn't been easy to direct ourselves in the way of love during Covid.

We read in today's gospel that Jesus says, *"The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep"* …If that isn't the way of love, I don't know what is. I'll admit I did stay up all night once to protect my sheep from the coyotes that were roaming the mountain where we lived and on more than one occasion, I did stay up all night lambing but I'm not sure I would go so far as to lay down my life for them. But isn't that the difference between Jesus and us.

Having grown up on a farm, I care deeply about the land. It was our livelihood. A few years ago, when so much Native American land in North Dakota was being threatened by big oil's Keystone pipe line, I was really upset. But you know what, while I did march against the pipe line in Bangor, I didn't, like so many others, put my life on the line and actually go to North Dakota. But I bet anything Jesus would've gotten on the first plane out there.

Fisher poem goes on…, *"I'm trying hard to sit at a table because it's expected required really."* We, all of us, are trying to do what is required of us… we are trying to be good people… are trying to walk the way of love. Fisher goes on, *"and my enemies are watching me eat and spill my drink, but I don't worry I know I'm safe if I will just do my best as I sit on this chair that wobbles a bit in the grass on the side of a hill."*

And therein lies why Jesus is so important to our lives. We too know we are safe, don't we, because Jesus is always with us no matter how short of the mark we feel we have fallen. It's right there in our reading, "*I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also…so there will be one flock, one shepherd."* Jesus does not see us as belonging or not belonging, as good or bad, as old or young or white or black or brown. It's all about love. What Jesus wants is to gather us all together in love. That means that in the end life is not about getting everything right but it is about what Bishop John A.T Robinson's says is an "utter openness in love to the other."

And that utter openness in love to the other extends to the earth and the sky, the trees and the flowers, the oceans and the rivers…all creatures great and small to which we are all connected and related.

My husband and I recently visited our son and his wife in Virginia. They have just bought a lovely town house not far from where they both work, and they were showing us the paths through the woodlands and describing a fox they had seen on the path behind their home. My son looked up at me and asked me if I thought the fox would be alright. Honestly, I was so pleased for them but…but… a part of my heart was completely in pieces. On this very land where their home is, I had played as a child with my brothers and our friends the Bowmans when it was their farm. We had roamed these woods and gotten into all kinds of mischief down by the creek. Now it was covered in office buildings and town homes.
I felt I was hovering between joy for our children in their new home and such deep grief that the farmland, the creek, all the old oaks and willows were all gone forever. Our kids would never know all the creatures great and small that inhabited this land. Except for the fox… I told my son the fact that he is still able to live and find a home and food nearby them gave me

just a little hope that we maybe we would figure it out before all our land is eaten up by developments and it's too late.

We **are** aware of how we are polluting the air and we **are** trying to find ways to clean it up. We **are** trying to find ways to clean up our waters too. We are trying to make sure that we don't use poisons and toxins on our land. We are looking at new ways to heat and cool our homes. We are really trying to find all the ways we can to care for this earth and its creatures. We are **trying** to care for both the people and the sheep

I know…some would choose to say it's not enough… But I choose to have hope that we are heading in the right direction even if we do have a long way to go. We've been through a terrible year and we are not quite out of the woods yet, but we are getting there. We still can, as Fisher says, set our wobbly chairs in the grass on the side of the hill, and watch as the sheep with their lambs fill up on the fresh, sweet spring grasses in the fields…We have a choice…we can choose to throw up our hands in despair at all that is wrong with our lives….or… we can find all the ways to care for this planet in whatever small ways we can, knowing that the gate to the sheepfold is always open to us, that we are safe, and that in this way, we are walking in love. Amen