

Fourth Sunday of Easter – C
Acts 13:15-16; 26-39
Rev. 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

I have a dear friend named Cornelia who I graduated from seminary with a year ago this week. I have no doubt that living with and studying with Cornelia has absolutely left an impact on me as a priest for the better. There are many things about Cornelia that made her a very special classmate to study along side of. First of all, Cornelia came to seminary already ordained a priest. There are usually a handful of seminarians in each class who are already ordained. Most of them are international and come from all over the Anglican Communion. For much of the world the standard of a three year residential Masters of Divinity seminary education is very much a luxury. Each diocese and bishop have their own process to help individuals meet the canonical requirements to move towards ordination. Cornelia is from the Episcopal Church in Navajoland and makes her home in New Mexico.

Cornelia quickly became a bit of a mama bear to many of us in our seminary class. Some of this occurred because she had experience as a priest and we all felt like wannabee, but really everyone in our class was drawn to Cornelia because she carried herself with much grace and seemed to approach everyone and everything with deep respect. She is quite, strong and thoughtful with her words. She is quick with a hug and is able to keep her cool no matter what is going on around her. She

is the only person I have known who could express intense anger and exude love at the very same time.

On a particularly challenging day for me full out doubt and frustration, Cornelia invited me to take a walk with her. During our stroll, Cornelia flippantly mentioned that she was surprised how well the sheep had prepared her for the priesthood. I stopped in my tracks and looked at her with confusion. Cornelia shared with me that she grew up on her family's sheep camp that they have had for generations. She was still running the camp when she left for seminary. I just looked at her astonished and said, "So you are a priest – and a Shepherd?"

The more I got to know Cornelia the more I saw clearly that her experience as a sheep herder truly helped to prepare her and form her into a great priest, who is now the Canon to the Ordinary for Navajoland. I never necessarily thought sheep herding was easy, I really didn't think of it at all. It was not a part of my reality having grown up in a small town and have lived in cities my adult life. Being in relationship with Cornelia helped bring John 10 alive for me. I started asking Cornelia to share tales of the camp with me whenever we had down time. Every time she went back home for a break I'd ask her to update me on her flock.

Her stories were equally exciting and exhausting. She told me stories of moving her heard in the rain, wind, snow and mud – of having to do extreme physical intervention with her sheep that as a strong but slight woman were hard

for me to imagine. She told me of the joy and celebration of new birth and the deep loss upon the unexpected death of one of the herd. She taught me of the importance of leading a flock from the rear and allowing the trusted veteran sheep lead from the front. She told me of the special care she provided to the sheep who were new mothers. She wanted them to be as healthy as possible so they could raise their own lambs. She told me her family's mantra of "keep them together and don't rush them"

What surprised me was the importance of allowing the sheep to be as liberated and free as possible. Cornelia really didn't engage or redirect her sheep too often unless she absolutely needed to. She stated that that she thought her job was to be present and speak to the sheep as lovingly as she possibly could. She said she would talk to her sheep almost all day long. They needed her voice to stay calm and continue to move towards their destination. The more time I spent with Cornelia learning about her life as a shepherd the more I found the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd as an immensely comforting image.

The idea that Jesus, Emmanuel – God with us – would use the metaphor of a shepherd is extremely beautiful and powerful. Our God loved the world so much that God took on flesh to live among us and guide us in a new way. Jesus lived his life very much in the spirit of the shepherd. He lead from the back and spent most of his time with those who often would be at the back of the heard. He spoke

words of love – but even for Jesus words were not enough. Even here in our passage today in response to the Jewish religious authority asking Jesus to confirm if he is the Messiah Jesus says, “I have told you and you do not believe.” He follows that with, “The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.”¹ It is clear to me that what made Cornelia a good shepherd was not because she had a beautiful and calming voice, which I’m sure is helpful, but because she was physically with her sheep. They knew her and she knew them because she was with them.

When a sheep was injured, Cornelia held them. When a sheep was sick, she allowed them to sleep with her near the fire. When a mother was confused and crying for her lamb who died, Cornelia cried with her, holding dear, the loss of life. This is an incarnation ministry. Cornelia is a good shepherd but she is not The Good Shepherd.

Our passage today is the less popular Jesus as the Good Shepherd passage at the end of John chapter 10. This passage has been challenging throughout history, much like the classic John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” These verses usher in questions about who is worthy of eternal life – or more bluntly who is in and who is out. This seems to be a question of debate that has

¹ John 10:25

always been present throughout history and continues to rage in our daily culture. While this is a popular question it isn't the right question for Jesus and he flips it back on those who were confronting him. It is not so much that those challengers are not held tenderly in Jesus and the father's hands, but that they are actively not recognizing their own sense of belonging within the flock. Jesus says – I have told you and shown you who I am and you do not believe – therefore you do not recognize yourselves as a beloved member of the flock.

Let's sit with this image for a brief moment all of creation held lovingly and tenderly in God's hands – with nothing, nothing great enough to snatch us from that hold and even more powerful Jesus, God incarnate is dwelling among creation to lead the flock of creation with the voice of love. There is nothing we can do to earn our place within the flock - we simply belong.

Take comfort my friends, whether you are stuck in the mud, lost and wondering in the wilderness, filled with anxious excitement of new beginnings, feeling lonely and isolated from the heard or simply doing your best to live a life worth of the Gospel of Christ – Jesus the Good Shepherd is very close by. His voice is calling for you. He is leading from the back to make sure you don't get left behind. Are you willing to listen? Are you willing to follow? Just know – you already belong.

