



**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Kristin Kaulbach Miles Sermon Transcript**

We, the Good Enough Shepherds

Each metaphor Jesus offers us during Eastertide –from vines to light to bread– is a different lens through which we can be guided and understand our call as Christians. On this Good Shepherd Sunday, Mother Kristin reminds us that although we may not be like the good shepherds in our time risking their lives as medical workers, perseverance, patience, and little daily acts of love are courageous too. The scriptures are Acts 4:5–12, Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16–24 and John 10:11–18.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of our creating, redeeming, and sustaining God, amen.

When my eldest son was about six, I was taking him into bed one night, it was a humid summer evening and light from the hallway was streaming in to the bedroom in rays and shafts of light. Jack pointed to this and said, mom, look, the power and the glory, and I looked. He paused and he said, or it could be Benny and the jets. I didn't understand the metaphoric connection between light in the early 1970s pop song, Benny in the jets by Elton John, but my child did. As author and minister Barbara Essex writes, the power of any metaphor is not that it describes of thing, but that it points to something else. Jesus was all about metaphors, to console, to contain, to orient, to point to something else as he prepared to leave his disciples. Bread, light, door, shepherd, way, truths, vine. They point to relationships that still will remain for the disciples on the other side of their loss. Their relationship with God, with Jesus, with one another. Each metaphor Jesus offers us in these weeks of Eastertide is a different lens through which we can look upon our life so that we might see what are we to do now. How are we to live.

The late scholar and passionate advocate for the Study of World Religions, Huston Smith in his final book, "The Soul of Christianity: Restoring The Great Tradition" speaks of the universal craving in our human makeup. Craving for knowledge of right direction, and how Jesus gave people that knowledge. Smith concluded that Christians don't just seek meaning, they eat it, drink it, swim in it, become it. The metaphor that Jesus gives us today for our direction and becoming is that of the Good Shepherd. We know good shepherds in our time, those who take risks to serve others when there is no one else to help. In the past year, this has been especially true of our EMT and frontline medical workers. There are high-stakes ways that people shepherd in this world, involving exposure and danger to themselves, it is holy work. They join in communion with all the other courageous good shepherds across the generations who have showed up to address hate and injustice, knowing that they may give their lives in these tasks. But I'd like to turn for a moment to those times that do not call for such crisis involvement.

If Jesus, the one who lays down his life for us, is modeling what we are to do to carry on his mission, to serve our flocks. We are to translate this into our daily life. If Jesus the Good Shepherd, capital G, and S is called to be that, we are called to be the 'good enough shepherds.' There are three guiding questions

in today's scriptures that arise for us as good enough shepherds. By what power do we do what we do? How do we respond when we fall short, or in the biblical language, our hearts condemn us? Where do we find rest? By what power or by what name did you do this? Peter is asked after his healing of a man has led to thousands of people filled with religious fervor. Our writer of Acts concludes the passage with Peter saying, that there is no salvation but in Jesus alone. I want to pause for a moment to acknowledge that the exclusivist language of this statement along with John 14:6, no one comes to the Father except through me, has been read across the centuries to tragic effect in the denigration and violence toward people of other faiths.

As Barbara Brown Taylor points out, when Peter makes this claim, he is speaking to other Jews who share a common ethos, a text, a way of life. Peter is not speaking to Hindus, or Muslims, or Buddhists. He has not addressing Christians and interfaith dialogue. Peter's words are set in an interfaith dispute in which those of his tradition don't see or agree with the divine reality that Peter has come to know so profoundly in Jesus Christ. A statement that has been used to shame or belittle other traditions must be read in the particular context of one Jew speaking to other Jews, amidst their emerging schism. Now we come back to the question posed to Peter, and it is one for us too, for each one of us. By what power or in whose name do you act? The model of Jesus the good shepherd is that our power, our action, our intention is to be the love and appreciation of God, our neighbor, and ourselves. The offering of what is only ours to give, our life, is not just a one-time grant sacrifice, but the sharing with others of what constitutes it: our time, energy, attention, voice, affection, skill, wisdom, creativity, honesty, vulnerability, physical strength, and resources.

A spiritual director once told me that every rejection, every mis-meeting, every slight or misunderstanding that causes us hurt is a little death. Most of these little deaths we can't control and we live through, our willingness to release the little deaths and their emotional hold on us, help us practice and prepare as we journey along our life to ultimately letting go in our final death. We learned from this passage from 1st John, that to be a good enough shepherd is for each of us to experience 'little lifes' too. That is, each moment in which we choose to see pain and need and not ignore how we might address it. Each activity of love gives us a little life. Father Alfred was talking with me the other day about how some residents in a nursing home have an ability to be tender and patient in the same setting where others are not, and how they are a balm to the workers. That is how they shepherd in their setting. First John teaches us that love is an activity, a moment or a response. Love is not only a word, it is a deed. Love is an ability that grows or contracts according to our practice of it, individually, and collectively.

The writer from 1st John asks us, how does God's love abide in any one who has the world's goods, that is resources they could share, and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? We have good reasons for choosing not to extend care or resources in every moment when a need is made known to us. But to close off our hearts from seeing the need of another, to refrain from engaging with others in addressing the great needs around us, this leads to our next question. How do we respond when we fall short, or in biblical language, when our hearts condemn us? The response of the good enough shepherd is to understand what holds us back personally, and to see kindred company of those with the same heaviness of heart and awareness, so that we are companioned and sustained in addressing systemic problems. Such honest reflection can also allow us to be more insightful about the weaknesses and struggles of others. The priest and monk, Saint Thomas a Kempis wrote in the 14th century, "Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be."

We face our limitations and that of others with the compassion from the beautiful line we hear today in 1st John, "God is greater than our hearts." That is, every failure to follow the commands to love and serve as we could, is met with a greater force that forgives and restores us so we can abide in that, so that we may practice the action of love again. Abiding, how we rest in God's love, is what Jesus the Good Shepherd calls us, the good enough shepherds to do. The language Jesus uses about being the good shepherd is from the Hebrew scriptures, "God is the shepherd who cares for the flock." Again and again, Jesus would have prayed this beautiful Psalm 23 that our choir is singing, "With its arc from insecurity to safety, and its reminder, I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The Psalm of the shepherd evokes green pastures, still water, paths of righteousness. This translates into what are basic needs for people: food, water, a safe path to travel, places for rest, refreshment, reorientation. Most importantly, the shepherd helps those and their flock to discern when what seems like death is actually death's shadow, so that the Pilgrim may go forward, companioned with less fear.

Jesus our good shepherd always goes first, saying to us, "I am there to meet you. You will find rest for your souls." The mystic Abraham Joshua Heschel said that the story of the Hebrew scriptures is not about our search for God, but God's search for us. The metaphor of the good shepherd brings home this reality. The Good Shepherd seeks us out, abides in us, restores our soul. I started out this reflection time together with how a child's mind metaphorically linked together light, the power and the glory, and an Elton John song. I want to end with another musical reference as music, which we so are nourished by in this place, music is part of the voice of the Good Shepherd, which calls to us and helps us follow. I once heard a jazz song with a refrain, "Nothing heals, but time and love." Time and love is what the Good Shepherd gives us. May we, the good enough shepherds, allow time and love to heal us. May we rest in that, and then go forward caring for our flocks with more practice and less fear.

Amen.