

## SERMON- Easter 4 (C)

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Acts 9:36-43

Revelation 7:9-17

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

May 11, 2025

John 10:22-30

Psalms 23

### OPENING:

Today, in the church, is Good Shepherd Sunday

BUT churchgoers don't like being told that they are sheep,  
because sheep, as the theory goes, are dumb and dirty.

This is a lie, by the way, perpetuated by cowherds and ranchers,  
just because sheep don't act like cattle.

That is, while you push cattle to get them to do what you want, you lead sheep.

If you stand behind a group of sheep, I am told, and whoop and holler, all the sheep  
will do is retreat again behind you. Sheep like to be led.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who, frustratingly sometimes, insists on leading us...  
by developing a relationship with us, by loving us, and by knowing us by name.

Today, in the church and in the world, is also Mother's Day

BUT churchgoers don't like to be told they are children.

And, for good reason, because it's infantilizing.

Jesus, however, does love like a Mother loves. Jesus is the "Good Mother."

I am not trying to make a provocative feminist point here—I just think Jesus has a  
remarkable capacity for love that does remind me of mothers that I have known.

On this Mother's Day and on this Good Shepherd Sunday, let's use both images,  
both holidays, as we explore the nature of God's love for us.

### GOSPEL:

Usually on this Sunday, we get cuddly, almost maternal, language about sheep and  
pastoring. But, instead, today's Gospel is fraught with tension as there is actually  
one more holiday in the mix: the Feast of the Dedication, otherwise known as  
"Hanukkah"—the Jewish holiday celebrating the reclaiming of the Temple.

Our reading, set in Jerusalem on a holiday loaded with political and religious  
meaning, will lead to a confrontation between Jesus and the authorities that will  
lead them to want to kill Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1993. "The Voice of the Shepherd." *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 140-146.

The authorities challenge Jesus: “Tell us plainly. Who are you? Check ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Don’t wiggle around. Give us a straight answer.”

We too sometimes, or maybe all the time, demand that sort of certainty and exactitude from God.

As parents, mothers and fathers, that sort of questioning gives us pause. All the sudden, children ask the BIG questions and they won’t settle for: “I don’t know, what do you think?” OR a “Go ask your mother.”

## **CONFIRMATION**

We are midway through our Confirmation Classes here at St. Timothy’s in anticipation of next month’s Bishop visit.

Both sets of classes, adult and youth, have elicited wonderful questions about God and the church.

Some I have been able to answer but, with some, one can only say that a complex question requires a complex answer.

I also have to say: “you are part of a tradition, the Episcopal Church, that honors that, that values such questioning. And will not provide you with an easy answer.”

In other traditions, there is often an effort to “figure out what the Bible means” with a mindset where we try to conquer in our faith questions, where we somehow want the Holy Spirit to be a coded message that we can crack if we are persistent and faithful enough.”<sup>2</sup>

Our tradition, and I am painting with a broad brush here, can be beautiful in the way that we invite the Holy Spirit to show us multiple meanings, and to help us participate together as a community in searching out a number of paths to God.

This is a gift, but it also can be frustrating and difficult.

We would almost prefer to be cattle, to be told what to do, instead of sheep, insisting on being led.

We try to remember that, in fact, in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor: “We are not in or out (of God’s kingdom, of the flock), based on our ability to believe. Our ability to believe is based on being in the flock, not the other way around.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jones, Gary D. 2009. “Pastoral Perspective.” (John 10.23-30) in *Feasting on the Word*, Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 444.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, 145

Spiritual leadership, thus, requires that one be like Jesus, to stand behind the sheep and say: “you can trust me in moving forward, I am not going to force you, I am not going to break out the cattle prod, Rather, I know you and you know me, so let’s journey together.”

With preaching, that means NOT trying to conquer the text, to chain it to a chair and then make it succumb to your intellect such that the skilled preacher leaves it, defeated and beaten to a pulp.<sup>4</sup>

With pastoral care, that means figuring out a way that your flock can grow in spiritual maturity.

That brings us back to Mother’s Day,

I am not your mother.

I cannot love you like a mother does.

I am also not your “father.” (in quotation marks)

One could argue, perhaps, that you/ we are “God’s children” and that I stand in God’s place as an earthly “father” who should proximate God’s love.

But I am going to fall woefully short on that account for many reasons, not the least of which is that I have a son who requires all the fatherly love that I have stored up.

That’s why I have a slight allergy to being called “Father”—my Low Church heart cannot warm to it—but in a deeper sense, I am worried that it keeps you, the congregation, as children. It arrests your development.

My hope and prayer, of course, is to help cultivate spiritual adults, not children.

## **DANGER**

Another thing that has happened in our Confirmation Classes is that I have been reminded that people have had negative experiences with the church, that there are instances, of course, when things are not that simple, when the situation is dangerous, and the way ahead does not seem as easy as simply shepherding a “safe space” for exploration.

That’s when you call in “Mom” to help you.

I remember once being a child, in my home in Culpeper, and I was just being a pill. I cannot remember what precisely I was doing but my mother, at some point, had

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<sup>4</sup> Florence, Anne Carter. 2004. "Put Away Your Sword!: Taking the Torture Out of the Sermon," in *What's the Matter with Preaching Now?* Mike Graves, ed. Louisville, John Knox: 93-108.

had enough and so she put me in the car, leaving my siblings at home.  
She drove us somewhere to a field by the side of the road.  
We got out and I *knew* that I was in trouble.  
Now, we are on the side of this road, with a fence and a field. And this being  
Culpeper that meant that were cows next to us.  
My mother is there and I am there,  
and also these cows, one of which is the ugliest cow I have ever seen.  
30+ years later, I can still see this cow, and feel the disappointment and the  
frustration and the love of my mother, wondering what is going to happen next.

What happened next?

Nothing, I got the message: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they  
follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch  
them out of my hand.”

Mothers, not uniquely and not universally, but often are Good Shepherds, they  
know their flock and they lead them to green pastures and still water, and out of the  
valley of the shadow of death.

## CONCLUSION

If that story doesn't do it for you, here is one to close with this. This one is about a  
minister who was speaking to a group of clergy at their diocesan convention. He  
was trying to talk about leadership and how to lead a flock through danger and the  
rest. He said these peculiar words:

“Enlarge, enlarge your bowels of affection.

Ye know nothing if ye are only acquainted with the voice of authority, reproof,  
correction, and with pointing out the letter of the law.

Be fathers;

    this is not sufficient;

    be mothers;

travail in birth again till Jesus Christ be formed in the heart of all your  
parishioners.”<sup>5</sup>

**AMEN**

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<sup>5</sup> [John Calvin: Commentary on Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians - Christian Classics Ethereal Library](#)