



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

## The Particularity of Love

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 26, 2015  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter: Based on John 10:11-18*

Even though the gospel of John begins with an incredibly beautiful hymn to Christ, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," the gospel is not my favorite of the narratives about the life of Jesus. You have heard my take on the reasons for that many times; and so it may come as a surprise that this lesson today is deeply sentimental for me. It is possible that I am simply in a sentimental mood, facing a time in a few weeks of saying goodbye to a parish I so deeply love; but it is actually more than that. Something about this story of the Good Shepherd took hold of me in a very profound way a long time ago; and in my heart I know that no amount of historical-critical scholarship will ever take from me the sense of goodness and mercy, indeed the love of God, which comes through in this little passage, a blip really on a broad tapestry, in a book of the bible that I don't even particularly like. But there it is; go figure. God—or perhaps the Good Shepherd—moves in mysterious and wondrous ways.

On a very hot summer day, the only kind of summer day Mississippi truly has, about sixteen years ago, severe chest pains knocked me off my feet—literally off my feet; and before I knew it, I found myself on a gurney headed for a quadruple by-pass. Though increasingly such procedures are not a big deal—at least for those not having their chest opened, it was a good-sized event in my life, unexpected and a bit early. When I finally was sent to a regular room after surgery and a couple of days in ICU, I found on my bedside table a little wooden figure of Jesus as a shepherd holding a beleaguered sheep. I remember thinking at the time that the sheep looked a little dumb, a bit dazed, and pretty scared—and even in my post-surgery fog, I remember thinking that I probably looked a good bit like that lamb. Jesus, on the other hand, appeared kind and focused, and though not at all a warrior type, very, very strong.

I shall never forget that little figure though it is long gone, no doubt shared with someone else in crisis, having morphed into some sort of itinerant talisman floating from one lost soul to the next. Somehow it represented for me—and I trust for others since—the providence of God, not magic, not an impenetrable shield but the eternal providence of God—a promise above all else that there is no place I can be—any of us can be—where God is not.

The image of Christ as our shepherd, indeed in John's gospel the good shepherd, retains its power long after most people in our world have ceased to have any contact with sheep. I have seen them idyllically placed on hillsides in Ireland and a few other lovely spots around the world though the closest I have come to one in real life was probably in a petting zoo. Their reputation is not stellar: purportedly they are malodorous and particularly dumb, prone to wondering off and finding themselves in precarious situations.

A good deal is made of the nature of the sheep in the use of this powerful and well-known metaphor. Preachers, straining the metaphor to present themselves as shepherd stand-ins, have on occasion had great fun in likening the people of God to sheep, making a sharp point here and there. Of course, there is some truth in it. Only the truly limited fail to recognize how obtuse each of us can be, and almost everyone knows what it feels like to wonder off the path of life, sometimes at great peril to ourselves and others. But, it seems to me, that no matter how true that may be about us, the real power in the story is the notion that in some mysterious and unlikely way, each of us is cherished and held in the regard of God as a shepherd holds a sheep. It is an extraordinary claim that Christ, who represents all that is hopeful and promising about life, loves with such particularity. On that day in the hospital when I gazed at what was actually a fairly cheesy figure of Jesus as shepherd, what I in fact saw signified for me an outward and visible sign that Christ was with me, carrying me, if you will allow the anthropomorphism, not in a schmaltzy way that made everything rosy but substantially and fundamentally sustaining me in a crisis.

The story of the Good Shepherd goes to the heart of our existential longing to be found. In profound ways I have searched for it all my life and continue to do so. The desire not to be lost is a primal human experience that follows us throughout life; and though we are often past masters at appearing not to be lost, having honed the capacity to seem confident and in charge, deep inside and quite the contrary there is emptiness that yearns to be filled, a near insatiable desire to be found.

I believe that we witness evidence of this unsatisfied search all around us. We see it in the fairly large numbers of Muslim youth leaving what appear to be stable homes to align themselves with ISIS. I am convinced that what they are searching for is the belonging that comes from being found. We miss the teaching of this moment if we conclude that it is only Muslim young people who sometimes follow destructive ways in their search to be found. In a column a couple of days ago, David Brooks made the claim that well-intended parents in our culture who absolutely want the best for their children often give their kids the impression that their love for them is conditional. When every choice is monitored for how it will lead to success and achievement in the world, what is conveyed, Mr. Brooks suggests, is that even in the parent/child relationship meritocracy truly rules the day and even determines the amount of love, if not literally then for sure the perception of it. Though journalism always allows the broad brush of hyperbole, his claim is worth thinking about. When our best efforts create little automatons in search of success, we may in fact be inculcating in them the notion that who they most truly are is somehow not acceptable and that only a perfect version of them is lovable. God deliver us from that. The result is a tribe of lost kids, not in our case in search of something as deadly as ISIS, but lost nonetheless and in need of being found.

I believe that faith is the answer, faith writ large, not narrowly defined but big and wide and deep enough to provide a context for a meaningful life. I know it seems simplistic, unrealistic that it could be so, but I believe that it is. Though this claim probably would not pass muster with the emphatically Trinitarian, I believe that the story of the Good Shepherd is actually a story about God. Christianity, which is bred in my bone, provides the context for my hearing the story of the Good Shepherd in a believable way. And for that I am eternally thankful.

But the story signifies in a way that is broader than we can imagine. It is a story about the God of the Universe, the God for whom I believe the whole world is searching. We don't have to own the whole story or claim to have the final understanding of what any, let alone all of it means; and in fact, if we insist that only our imagery of God, only our stories of God's presence in the world and in our lives are true, we may do more harm than good.

But the answer in pluralism is not that we become less faithful but more. It is imperative that we not lose our story in a world of stories. Our children need and deserve to hear us speak quietly and with awe of God, of the power and presence of God in our lives. Of course, doing so presents a minefield of potential problems, our own understanding being tentative and unformed. But we have to try.

Perhaps it is a simple story, one like this, about a Good Shepherd, not a magic action hero who rescues us from all disasters, but a Good Shepherd from whom we can never be lost, that may give us the inroad to talk about what God might truly mean in our lives.

Deliver us, O Lord, from sophistication that makes it hard for us to imagine being so loved.

In the name of God: *Amen*