



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road
roswell, georgia 30076

29-Apr-2007 Easter 4

SCRIPTURE: Acts 9:36-43 John 10:22-30

SERMON: Avoiding The Don Imus Moment (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

A group touring the Holy Land had been told over and over, like every group in Israel, that shepherds never drove the sheep like cattle but always walked in front, leading them on. One day as their bus passed a bend, they looked out the window and saw a flock of sheep not being led, but being driven. The tour guide was out of himself and asked the driver to stop. He went over and had an extended conversation with the man driving the sheep. He returned to the bus with a relieved look and a triumphant smile announcing, "He's not the shepherd. He's the butcher!"

The use of the image, the person, the description of the shepherd is endemic in Scripture. In both testaments, the image and the title, Shepherd, is applied to God, to kings and leaders, to Jesus, to the leaders of the community of faith and indeed to every disciple and follower. Normally we view the image of the shepherd as a calm, quiet, pastoral picture, but today I want you to struggle with it, because this image, this description of God is quite disturbing. It raises huge questions about what it means to live our faith. I want you to have to wrestle with what "shepherd" means, so we can best express who God is in our lives and in our life together.

One of my mom's all-time favorite movies was the story of Gladys Aylward told in the movie "The Inn of the Sixth Happiness." Aylward faced many obstacles before being selected to go to China as a Christian missionary. She was still there as the Sino-Japanese war raged in the 1930's. Her selfless devotion won the admiration of the local ruler and she became his inspector of the feet of women, enabling her to be their advocate calling for the abolition of the painful practice of binding feet. She most clearly expresses the role of shepherd when the Japanese invaded her province. She is put in charge of the mission children, to help their escape and she led them on a dangerous trek across the mountains to safety. The children are cold and scared, so to lift their spirits she has them sing the children's song "This Old Man." Heartened by Aylward's example, her courage and constant encouragement, and the distraction of singing the song together, the children followed their shepherd to safety.

Another more contemporary vision of the role of shepherd can be seen in the recent movie "Freedom Writers." Hilary Swank starred as Erin Gruwell, a real-life, fresh out of college teacher at a Long Beach California high school given the difficult task none of the other teachers wanted: teaching the freshman English class made up mostly of minority students whom everyone had deemed unteachable. Erin barely coped during the first weeks of her ordeal. The unruly class talks back scornfully to her. Erin seizes a piece of paper being passed around, a crude drawing cruelly caricaturizing another student. Erin scolds the class, comparing them to another gang who depicted members of a different race in viciously cruel ways. She describes the Nazi persecution of the Jews in the Holocaust, an event that only one student in the class had ever heard of.

Sensing a teaching moment, Erin asks her department head if she can use a stack of copies of The Diary of Anne Frank which sit unused in the Library. The answer she gets is a blunt, "No", with the explanation that the students would mark and destroy the books. Undeterred, Erin takes a second job to earn the money to buy her own copies. You see, Erin believes that this great story of a rebellious Jewish teenager persecuted by the world just might connect with her students. That despite the differences in time, culture and race, Anne Frank's story can help her students. *And she is correct!* A creative teacher, yes, a shepherd, yes, she is fully vindicated. The students devour the book! One abused black student reads in a tiny closet that serves as his sanctuary from the harsh world, not dissimilar to Anne Frank's attic room. The students fill their notebooks with thoughts and questions and observations, having at last found an adult who is willing to listen to them, and not just lecture them. Pouring out their hearts, the relationship between teacher and student grows, Erin becomes their shepherd. She knows each of them by

name, she knows their story, their struggle. She earns their trust, she goes the extra mile, she takes risks for the sheep.

A census taker was calling on an apartment in a crowded tenement in Detroit. A woman holding a baby came to the door. Five other children huddled around her clinging to her skirt. The census taker started his list of questions. Soon he came to, "How many children do you have?" The woman answered carefully, "Well, there is Debbie Sue, there is Jimmy, there is Tracy Lynn, there's Beth Anne, there is..." The census taker cut her off impatiently: "Forget the names, Lady. Just give me the number." The woman's eyes blazed as she answered, indignantly, "*In this house, the children are not numbers. They are names!*"

You and I may be basically numbers to the Federal or State Government, our credit union, our insurance company, our pension provider or other large institutions, but we will *always be names and people to the Good Shepherd*. Jesus will always love every member of his flock with that fierce love that the mother in Detroit mother had for each child. And this is where I got today's sermon title: How to avoid the Don Imus moment. So many problems and issues arise when we allow ourselves to stereotype people and when we fail to recognize the worth of an individual. I think... I hope that if the women of the Rutgers basketball team had come on the Imus Show one at a time, he would have found them to be distinct and distinctive individuals, with personality and talent and brains and yes the drive and push of desire. Painting with a brush too broad even for his own big mouth, by comparing them as he did, was a grave community disservice.

In comparison, Jesus, the Good Shepherd sees us, knows us, and loves us *even in our moments of foolishness and weakness*. Sheep are not just fluffy, cuddly and cute; they're fairly difficult to rear. Sheep, as creatures of habit will, when left alone, graze over the same worn-out spot of grass until they eat right down through the roots until it is destroyed completely. Skittish, they are easily scattered. Seemingly timid they can be cruel. The stronger ones will bite and butt those weaker. Sheep are also greedy. Seeing a juicy tuft of grass, they will push into a clump of thorn bushes to get to it. In the process, they can get their coats tangled in the thorns and become permanently caught and eventually starve to death. And of course, they stray! A sheep will nibble its way lost, one tuft of grass at a time, moving little by little, further away from the safety of the flock, until it is lost or in danger.

Our Good Shepherd knows that we sheep are not easy. We have our destructive and self-destructive sides. We get spooked. We are cruel, greedy and selfish. We get in a tangle. We wander so wrapped up in ourselves and our concerns that we lose sight of where we need to be going. Yet the Good Shepherd still loves us. The Good Shepherd still seeks after us. The Good Shepherd still searches for us calling us by name. The Good Shepherd still lays down his life - *for us*.

Jesus the great Good Shepherd embodies the love of God for all creation.

Jesus the Good Shepherd knows us by name, has a tender space for every person, no matter who they are or how they live - like that harried Detroit mother.

Jesus the Good Shepherd comes to challenge and chasten, to expose anything in us that is a fraud, to assure us that we will never be abandoned and that we have the opportunity, the necessity, the ability, to grow be more self-aware, to be more aware of others, especially those different for us, and to be more God-aware – like Erin.

Jesus the Good Shepherd comes to shield and protect, to lead us away from danger and towards safety, calling out to us in the time of our dislocation, sharing our songs of faith, going every step of the way with us – like Gladys.

Like Gladys, like Erin, like that mother, like Jesus, we are called together in this congregation to embody the love that God has for this world. Sometimes it is very clear what we need to do or not do to express the love that God has for the world. Sometimes in the complexity of life things may not be so obvious. At times like that we don't simply shrug our shoulders and move on regardless. Rather we engage in discussion and discernment and engagement until we come to the best understanding possible, and then we get about doing all we can. Other times we find that what we can do and say and share is limited, limited because of varying demands upon our time or resources, sometimes priorities must be set and not every project can be on the front burner all

the time..... *or can it?*

I would put it like this - more things could be on the front burner if we added more front burners. As we give and share more, we are able to give better and fuller attention to more people, more needs, more programs, sharing more of who we are and who we have discovered God to be. With more front burners we have more burners overall and we can turn the heat up and so achieve more of what God would like to see us do in the world. By sacrificing even some of our own comfort, our own luxury, *we can be better shepherds for God, for one another, for God's big ol' flock – around the world.*

Leslie Newbigin served the Christian community in India where he helped found the ecumenical Church of South India. He was planner and a doer but also a thinker and a writer, who influenced thinking about the mission of God expressed in and through the local church. He stated, "I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer...is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. (E)vangelistic campaigns, distributions of Bibles and literature, conferences, even books such as this one are secondary and have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community. Jesus did not write a book He formed a community"

"Jesus did not write a book but formed a community."

Let's apply Newbigin here: Jesus, the good shepherd, did not leave us a Consultant's report which we could endlessly revise, amend, debate, discuss, dice and slice. Jesus called us to a shared purpose: to be a community where we belong and where we are challenged to live out our faith, such that other people will discover the care of the Shepherd for themselves. In this way, they will come to belong to this community where they will be challenged to grow in faith and love, and so continue to offer the welcome and the challenge of the shepherd to more and more people.

Shepherding abounds in the life and mission of our congregation:

- *In the time offered to help connect families through the Safe Havens Program;*
- *In the opportunity afforded people who need good food through Angel Food;*
- *In the delivery of fresh, leftover Restaurant food to Open Door;*
- *In the renovations made to Leon's home;*
- *In the time and imagination spent working with children and youth to guide them in their faith and life;*
- *In the commitment of the Deacons to their Care and Connection Teams;*
- *In PW, in PrimeTimers, in the Men's Group people are supported when they face difficulties and share their life's journey one with the other;*
- *In the recent Community Celebration Sunday, in VBS, in our desire and intention to connect with our neighbors;*
- *In the support of and involvement with Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts;*
- *In seeking to offer appropriate Sunday School classes or experiences to engage people of every age;*
- *In prayers offered for so many who are in need;*
- *In our relationship with our sisters and brothers in the Ebenezer Brazilian Presbyterian Church;*
- *In HomeStretch, North Fulton Charities, Habitat, Drake House;*

Seeking to shepherd people in every circumstance of life, to offer them God's love, to share along with them God's grace, is to together discover what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ in 2007! *Apprentice Shepherds, in the name and in the style of the Good Shepherd, this is who we are! Amen.*

Acts 9:36-43

36Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. **37**At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. **38**Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us

without delay.” 39So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. 41He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. 42This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

John 10:22-30

22At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” 25Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; 26but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. 30The Father and I are one.”

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