
You Are the Lord's

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Fourth Sunday of Easter – Year B**

True confession: I was a little ticked off when the dean asked me to preach this morning. Oh, sure, I feigned enthusiasm in front of him, but the minute I got home, I started complaining so pathetically and persistently that the rest of my family developed an urgent need to go clean out the garage.

Good Shepherd Sunday, as this Fourth Sunday of Easter is commonly known, doesn't usually stir up much excitement in me. Give me Jesus as the Vine, Jesus as the Light of the World, even Jesus as the Door—heck, any of those inanimate objects— but Jesus as a shepherd of dirty, wayward animals? Well, bah! Or, rather, baaaaah! Sorry, I couldn't resist. Now I'm feeling a bit sheepish.

Nevertheless . . . nevertheless—and that was my last bad joke, I promise—something hit different for me this year. Something hit different for me as I reviewed today's familiar gospel passage. You see, this is my first Good Shepherd Sunday as the mother of a teenager. Like many parents desperate for guidance in this new and challenging season of life, I've been reading a lot of "how to" books. My current favorite is a title by Jennifer Wallace called *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic and What We Can Do About It*.

Among the many concerning trends Wallace reports in her book is a survey showing that 1/3 of today's teens do not believe their life matters to others. Equally disturbing is that 25% of adolescents in one study felt that their parents hold them in what psychologists call "conditional regard"—that is, that their parents' love for them is tied to their accomplishments.

You don't have to be a teenager, or the parent of one, to feel this stuff deep in your soul. Whatever stage of life we are in, it can be easy to wonder, in a culture such as ours, *Have I done enough? Achieved enough? Does the life I am living have intrinsic value or is there more that I could—or should—be accomplishing? In the end, is there something definitive I can point to as proof that my life has mattered?*

And here is what strikes me about this morning's gospel lesson: that, at its heart, this is a story—this story about Jesus the Good Shepherd—this is a story about mattering. It is a story about value and acceptance. It is a story about a love so strong that it gives not one hoot about the worthiness of its recipients. A love that is so invested, so "all in," that, as we learn in another of the gospels' shepherding stories, it chooses again and again to risk going after just one wayward straggler. A love that does not have to be earned in any way but is freely offered. "See what love the Father has given us," we heard in last Sunday's reading from the First Letter of John—not awarded, but given. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are."

If you take nothing else away from this place today, let it be this: that you matter to Jesus. You are a beloved child of God! Your life is of infinite worth. This is not tied to anything you accomplish. On the contrary, one of the most striking aspects of this morning's gospel lesson is that the activity of the sheep is not definitive. The story is not primarily about them and anything they do or don't do. It is the activity of the Good Shepherd that really counts.

And we know from so many stories throughout the gospels that this is the Good Shepherd's favorite activity: bringing home the least, the last, and the lost with completely unconditional regard. "Gather up the fragments so that nothing will be lost," Jesus tells his disciples after a big meal one day, speaking not only about scraps of bread but also about that man outside Walgreens holding up his cardboard sign asking if he can work for food,

about the way you felt the day you learned you had been rejected by your top college choice, about the relationship that once held such promise but has now become a source of deep pain and regret, about the business decision you made that ended up hurting vulnerable people. Gather up the fragments, Jesus says—the brokenness, the leftovers, the shame, the disappointment, the parts of life you were sure were just trash—gather that up so that nothing will be lost. So that none of you will be lost. For you are precious to me. All of you—the good, the bad, and the ugly. You matter, not because of anything you do but just because you are.

Which, of course, is great Good News. We matter! You and I matter. We have inherent dignity and worth. But that's not all, this morning's gospel tells us. That's not all. We matter, and so do they. So do they. "I have other sheep who are not of this fold," says Jesus. "I must bring them also." Here, then, is the really challenging part of Good Shepherd Sunday. Accepting that our rivals, our enemies, those whom we resent, those of whom we are jealous, those who for us are the very embodiment of "other-ness"—accepting that they, too, are the beloved of God, those whom Jesus pursues and enfolds with a relentless love.

Archbishop Helder Camara was an outspoken advocate for the poor in his native Brazil and regularly encountered the wrath of the military dictatorship that controlled that country through much of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Once, government officials hired an assassin to go and get rid of him. When the assassin arrived at Camara's front door, an argument ensued. "Go on and kill me," the archbishop said, when the other man hesitated. "That's what you have been paid to do, so do it." "I can't," the would be killer replied. "I can't do it." "Why?" Camara asked. To which the reply came simply, "You are the Lord's."

You are the Lord's. I can think of few things more important for us to speak, few words more important for us to embody during this time of seemingly impenetrable enmity and violence in our world. *You are the Lord's.* You, whose people have hated our people for centuries, you are the Lord's. You with your abhorrent political views and insistence on shouting down everyone who disagrees with you, you are the Lord's. You who have always been a success, though sometimes you had to trample over others in the quest to stay on top, you are the Lord's. You who have arrived in this country illegally and are now receiving benefits many think you do not "deserve," you are the Lord's. You who are being told by developers that the community where your family has lived for generations is more valuable to their investors than to your sense of self and belonging, you are the Lord's. You who take advantage of the poor with predatory lending practices, you, too, are the Lord's. You who woke up this morning wondering whether it was even worth it to get out of bed, you, especially, are the Lord's.

You are the Lord's. This is the Good Shepherd's reminder—and challenge—to each of us this day. May his loving embrace and acceptance lead us all to green pastures and restore our souls. Amen.