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## *Who is Your Good Shepherd?*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell**  
**Easter 4 – Year B**

*“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”* John 10:16

I am named after my father.

This privilege has meant many things to me. Some have been good. I have always been proud to be my father’s son. Others have been more challenging. It took a long time for me to learn that Dad was talking to himself on the golf course. I was well into my teenage years before I stopped worrying that I had done something wrong whenever Dad said “George!” after hitting a shot that he didn’t like!

The most important thing about having the same name as my father, though, may have been that it made me learn how to listen to my mother’s voice.

I could tell by her tone of voice whom she was calling – and why. There was a big difference between the “George” that meant someone was on the phone or at the door asking for my father, and the “George” that meant I had forgotten to take out the trash or clean up my room. I could ignore the first. But, I had to respond to the second right away!

The shepherding imagery of John points to the same kind of listening and requires the same kind of response. The shepherd calls his own sheep by name. The sheep have learned to listen to his voice; they know when he is calling someone else, and when they need to respond right away!

John probably got this language from the prophet Ezekiel.

Ezekiel cast God as the good shepherd who led Israel to safe pastures. John, then, is saying that Jesus is doing what God does. He is taking on the role of the good shepherd who will lead his followers to new life.

Jesus, in other words, is being so transparent to God that he is making God more believable to others. He is calling people into being, and giving them new life. He is healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind, and, in general, doing whatever it takes to restore them to the community. He is saying, in effect, “listen to my voice and you will find yourself in a new world with abundant life.”

This is what it really means to lay down your life for another.

We usually think of Jesus giving up his life in death and getting it back again in the resurrection. But, it’s not just about our own salvation; it’s also about the redemption of the world. And, as incredible as it sounds, we believe that redemption of the world is possible, if we learn how to listen and then take the risk of responding right away!

We tend to shy away from the risk – many times without knowing what we are doing. We don’t help others because we think that someone else should do it, or because we think that we are not qualified, or because we think that the solution is more than one person can accomplish. But, perhaps ironically, when it comes to helping others, simple things are often the most helpful.

Lena Rustin is a good example. Rustin was a speech therapist in London, who specialized in treating young children who stammered. One of the most effective parts of her therapy was teaching the parents of her patients about a simple, but counterintuitive, aspect of dysfunctional behavior.

She asked the parents of her patients to visualize the single most precious object they possessed. She then told them to imagine that it had been stolen. When she asked them how they felt, they described predictable emotions – shock, grief, and sadness, almost like a death had occurred.

“Now you understand,” she would say, “what your children will feel like on losing their stammers.” This confused the parents; they thought that their children would be happy to lose their stammers. After all, their stammers were the problem for their children, getting in the way and holding them back.

Yes, Rustin would say, but their stammers have become part of their identity, how they see themselves. Losing it will be painful, like losing an arm or a leg. You have to create an environment that encourages your children to change, that gives meaning to their pain and suffering.

You need to praise them, she said.

Every day, you need to notice something that each member of the family has done that is worthy of praise, and point it out. You need to be specific and clear and thankful. You need to turn your home into a place marked by mutual respect and positive reinforcement, a place where change becomes possible.

This is, of course, not just a good strategy for dealing with stammering children. It is also a way of working toward redemption. It’s a way of living into the new world that Jesus called us to inhabit.

In telling this story, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that he learned about Rustin’s strategy of praise while filming her work for a television documentary. There had been tensions among the camera crew, he said. Things had gone wrong at various stages during the production, and people were blaming one another. After they left Rustin, though, the crew – whether consciously or unintentionally, Sacks said he never knew – started praising one another. Immediately, the atmosphere was transformed.

As Sacks says, “Praise is an essential part of moral education. The best teachers are not necessarily those with a gift for instruction. They are people who value their students, identify their potential, and get them to believe in themselves.”

So, I wonder, do you hear a still small voice calling you?

Do you hear the voice of someone who values you, who identifies your potential, who believes in you more than you believe in yourself?

You have learned, I’ll bet, that this voice never calls you to do something that you can’t do, and that it never calls you to do it somewhere else or at some other time.

You have learned, I’ll bet, that, when it calls, this voice is calling you to respond right away!

I wonder, who taught you to listen to this still small voice?

Who was it that became so transparent to God that she made God believable for you?

Who was it that took the risk of becoming your good shepherd?

I’ll bet that if you think about it for just a moment, you will know who it was.

And, I wonder, who is it, standing in front of you today, that needs you to teach him how to listen?

Who is it that needs you to be so transparent to God that you make God believable for him?

Who is it that needs you to value him, to identify his potential, to make him believe in himself, or to restore him to the community?

Who is it that needs you to take the risk of becoming his good shepherd?

I'll bet that if you think about it for a moment, you will know who it is.

Amen.

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