

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

TO BE CONTINUED

John 10: 11 – 18 May 3, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd.
He will gather the lambs in his arms
And carry them in his bosom.
He will gently lead the mother sheep. Isaiah 40

These words from Isaiah are in my mind from the Messiah written by Handel. The words paint a picture of a model shepherd. The shepherd is essentially good. The shepherd is mindful of his own.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep. A casual look at a flock of sheep – well, they all look pretty much alike – just a flock of sheep. But to the good shepherd, just a glance and he knows their character – the way they will act and react. The Good Shepherd knows the flock and he calls them by name. The text for today says, “I know my own.” We know names are important. I believe Libba’s keeping up with our names and the names of visitors helps us build a community – it helps us to be able to call each other by name. We belong together. We have names. When you know another person’s name, you are more comfortable with each other.

A few Sundays ago I watched this idea of community play out – right there in the narthex. I greeted John Owen as he walked out of worship. As soon as he passed by me, Jack walked up to him and they began to discuss this piece of cheese that Jack had on a tooth pick. I was greeting other people as they left worship and could not hear the conversation between Jack and John. But I didn’t need to hear to know that whatever it was, it was important to Jack. And John was taking him serious. It made me realize how important our community is – that Jack, a 7 year old felt comfortable to walk up to John and tell him about his cheese on that tooth pick. Jack may know that John is an ophthalmologist, but that didn’t seem to matter. That may be a small thing, a small thing, but it speaks big in terms of our community.

The text says the Good Shepherd “knows his own.” To me, that is one of the most important understandings of the Christian faith. This God, who created the world – who set the universe in motion – knows our name! The Good Shepherd image of God is important.

And today, here in the Gospel of John, Jesus spends a lot of time making sure the disciples know the difference between the Good Shepherd and one who is a hireling. A hireling will do some things for the sheep. But the hireling is not going to risk his own life for the sheep. At the sign of real danger the hireling will make his own escape. He will not risk himself for the sheep. In all honesty – if you are hired to watch sheep and it is your life or the life of a sheep, what would you do? But the image here is not really talking about sheep. It is the Good Shepherd who sets himself between the flock and danger. The Good Shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep.

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I realize on hearing this thought turns to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. As Good Shepherd, Jesus was willing to lay down his life for the sheep. He was not a martyr against his will. He would, like a good shepherd, give up his life for the good of his followers. It might cost him his life – and it did – but Jesus' works of forgiveness, compassion, inclusion and love were followed by his deeds.

I think it is important to not try to use this text to exclude other religions from their ideas of the way to follow the Good Shepherd. There is one flock. There is one shepherd. But there are many folds. I believe this fellowship of God includes sheep of many folds – Christian, Buddhist, Moslem, Hindu, Jewish. There is one God and this God cares for us all.

John is writing this text at this point in his gospel to point to the cross and resurrection. That is what is coming next in the gospel of John. What do we make of that?

When I was a kid, the Saturday movies always had a double feature – usually westerns. There would be previews of movies for the next week. And there would be a twenty minute serial. Some of you are old enough to remember the ending to the serial. The words would flash on the screen – “to be continued.” Does this new life of the resurrection live in us? No where in this discourse about the Good Shepherd are those who follow Jesus depicted as shepherds – not even assistant shepherds. All who gather around Jesus are members of the flock. When the church sets the leadership of the church apart from the sheep then I believe the church is diminishing this concept in John 10. Do you remember that one of the statements important to our United Church of Christ is that we are all ministers? We are all responsible for caring for the flock. If this resurrection is to be continued, if this new life is to be continued, then we have work to do. This resurrection must live in us. What does it mean for Christians to live as those who follow Jesus? I know we could discuss that all day. To me it means the central message that we love one another must be continued in our daily living.

One of the three points in Luther Smiths' book INTIMACY AND COMMUNITY is WE ARE CALLED TO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE. We know about that here at Pilgrim. We have been at this journey for over 100 years. Now we are in a temporary location, we have questions that need answering, Our future is far from certain. Even in the midst of this uncertainty, we still make our pledge to the church, we still receive new members, we still baptize our babies. Our future may be uncertain, but this idea of the Good Shepherd taking care of us is evident in our living together as community. I pray that you are excited about our future. To BE CONTINUED is a strong statement about our journey and the presence of God among us.