

St. James Lutheran Church
April 13, 2008
Easter IV

First Reading: Acts 2:42-47
Second Reading: I Peter 2:19-25
Gospel: John 10:1-10

Life in the Flock **By Richard Holmer**

To say, "The Lord is my shepherd" is not the same thing as saying:

- "The Lord is my personal trainer" or
- "The Lord is my guru" or
- "The Lord is my special advisor" or
- "The Lord is my co-pilot."

You'll never see a shepherd watching over a single sheep. A shepherd is responsible for the whole flock. So to have a shepherd isn't like having a partner; it's to be one sheep among many – part of a large flock. Actually, this is a good thing. As Christians, we learn from and are blessed by the flock as well as by the shepherd. Fellow believers teach us what it is to follow Jesus, our shepherd. And God blesses us in many ways through those persons who are fellow members of the flock.

The simple truth is, you can't be a Christian all by yourself. Solo Christianity is not an option. On our own we tend to go astray – just like wayward sheep. The flock helps to keep us where we need to be. As Jesus relates in a parable, when we do wander off, he pursues us till he finds us – and then he brings us back: back where we belong, back to the flock.

Our faith relationship with the Lord is something deeply personal – but it is not private or separate. We do become part of this community of believers one at a time – God calls each of us by name at Baptism. So there is a place for speaking in the first person singular as Christians. We say, "I believe" at baptism and at confirmation. It's perfectly appropriate to refer to the Lord as "my" shepherd – just as I can refer to "my" mom and dad, even though I have a brother and a sister. Yet as we become part of this community of faith, we also learn to speak in the first person, plural. And so in the Nicene Creed we say "We" believe. We pray, as Jesus taught us, to "Our" Father in Heaven. We commune with God as a gathered community, around a shared table.

The readings for this Good Shepherd Sunday speak eloquently of the church as a community. Acts 2 paints a beautiful picture of togetherness in the early church:

"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent

much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

The gospel reading from John has Jesus describing his relationship to the whole flock. Speaking of all his sheep, he says:

“I come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

An abundant life is a shared life – a life lived together with others. From the very start, God saw that it is not good for humans to be alone. So God founded human community in the bond of marriage. And from marriages come families – the basic building block of human society. The family is our first experience of community: where we begin to learn what it is to be human.

- * Some people live in remote locations, but most choose to live in neighborhoods because that interaction brings us inspiration, security and joy.
- * Some kids are home-schooled, but most of us go to school with a bunch of other kids – just being in that social mix teaches us a lot of things not in the curriculum.
- * A lot of us play sports – some individual like golf or tennis. But playing on a team teaches us lessons about cooperation and sacrifice and waiting your turn that are hard to learn all by yourself.
- * And you can stay home and read your bible and watch any number of church services on TV. But many realize that faith really lives and breathes when we gather together to worship and serve God.

There is certainly a time and place for solitude and for individual pursuits. But abundant life necessarily includes time in community. Togetherness is itself a form of abundance. A joy shared is a joy multiplied. Individual abundance is finally narrow and miserly. Acts 2 describes the shared life of the first Christians. A few chapters later (Acts 5) we get the sad story of Ananias and Sapphira – who are literally victims of their own selfishness.

What’s called for is a kind of balance and rhythm between solitude and community. And today, the accent is on community. What do we mean by Christian community?

- * Certainly, worshiping together. We already do this. Yet we could do so much more consistently. Here at the weekly family meal, well over half the family is absent. If we believe in the value of what we do at worship, then to be absent is to be diminished. But it’s not only the absent who miss out. Those who are present are diminished by the absence of fellow

members. Everyone likes a full church! Each of us can do our part to make it so.

- * We study together: small groups, bible studies, newcomer classes, first communion. Some churches have individualized confirmation, but I believe an essential part of learning the faith is learning to be together. Retreats are great learning times of togetherness. Twenty women from this congregation are on a retreat in Michigan. I remember what a member said after returning from a weekend retreat in my last congregation. "We came as many – we returned as one."
- * We serve together. This is the real blessing of mission trips. Not only the work that gets done, but also the coming and going together. It's the same with work days and the sewing group here at church.
- * We eat together. We break bread together at the Lord's table, but also at pot lucks, church picnics and progressive dinners. This is time well spent.

Togetherness and community are a good thing not just for some of us: it's good for all of us. It's not about community for the sake of community. Togetherness is not the goal. Even a bigger, better church is not the goal. Christ is the goal: fellowship in Christ.

The alternative to being self-centered is not to become church-centered, but Christ-centered. A healthy congregation is a Christ-centered congregation, focused on the Shepherd. We aim to keep Christ at the center of all we do – and then as we move closer to Christ, we will move closer to one another.

When our individual wants and priorities are at the center of our lives, then we become little more than bumper cars, randomly and chaotically colliding as we frantically pursue our own interests.

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Remember this: sheep do not initiate their relationship with the shepherd. We are not members of this family by our choice, but by Christ's. We did not choose him to be our shepherd; he chose us. Despite some appearances to the contrary, like: we talk about "joining the church," we "sign up" for things – ultimately you and I belong to this community not by choice, but by the grace of God.

And to truly experience that grace – and the abundance it brings – we need to come together in community. We need to take the time, to make the time – even when it's not convenient. Who ever said being a follower of Christ would be convenient?

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So the message to the flock is this: We need to adjust how we understand our relationship to Christ as our shepherd.

It will always be personal.

But it can't be private.

If you want a close and loving relationship with the Shepherd, you better get used to hanging out with the flock, learning to love them.

So we need to change our behavior as well. What's called for is a conscious, deliberate effort to spend our most precious possession: our time – to spend more of it together.

I'm not suggesting that we try to go back to the first century, sell all our possessions, and live as a Christian commune. I am saying we can spend more time in fellowship and interaction with fellow Christians: these people right here are the flock of God where God has placed us. Taking time to be together is taking time to get closer to Christ; in other words, giving God more time to bless us.

Amen.