

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “The Shepherd’s Voice”

May 3, 2009

Reverend Art Ritter

*John 10:11-18*

*11 ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’*

Perhaps you are not a Monty Python fan, but the Scripture lesson this morning brings to mind a skit from the show *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* back in the mid 1970’s. I watched it again on YouTube this week and found it as funny as I originally remembered. But I am just as certain that my wife, who is not a Monty Python fan, would not find it funny at all. In the skit, a sheep farmer was being interviewed. In his flock is a sheep named Harold who has been trying to teach the other sheep that they can fly if they just put their minds to it. He wants to try to liberate them from their dull, boring existence and open them to a whole new world of freedom. The viewer doesn’t get to see it, but at the time of the interview, there are many sheep in the trees. As the interview progresses, we hear a series of dull thuds as the sheep try to launch themselves from their branches. When asked about the flying the farmer remarks, “Well, they don’t actually fly so much as they plummet.” The problem is Harold, the voice to whom the other sheep have been willing to listen. He has led them astray. The farmer says about Harold, “He is the most dangerous of animals, a clever sheep.”

During the summer, if I am near a park when some kids are playing baseball, I will often stop and view the action. If I am in the need for some comedy, T-Ball is especially good viewing. It is always a rather interesting blend of excited but naïve players and well-intentioned but fanatic parents and coaches.

I remember one game I saw a few years ago. There was a young boy on second base, thrilled to be that far along the basepath. He was bouncing up and down on the bag, clapping his hands with enthusiasm. His joy was short-lived though. The next batter up hit a ball that rolled right to the shortstop, directly in front of him. Suddenly he did not know what to do. The third base coach was screaming at him, “Stay, stay, stay!” The first base coach was yelling at him, “Run, run, run!” His teammates were hollering,

“Go, go, go!” All of the parents in the stands were waving their hands in different directions and screaming his name, telling him to do something-anything! It was obvious the poor little boy didn’t know what to do.

Finally, several seconds after the ball reached the shortstop, the young man took off frantically for third base. By this time the shortstop had already thrown the ball to first base. He made it easily to third, actually a good base-running play that occurred apparently by accident. When he got to third I heard his coach ask him, “What took you so long to run?” The young boy replied, “Cause everyone was yelling something different at me. I didn’t know what to do. Then finally I heard my dad’s voice. He was telling me to run to third base. So I decided to go.”

In his book *Testimony*, professor and preacher Tom Long tells the story about a conversation he had with a prominent church leader from the former Soviet Union. Long asked him what it was like to try to live out one’s faith in a hostile and controlled environment. The Russian church leader said that it was difficult. He said that KGB agents would often infiltrate the church, posing as clergy. He said that he would go to church meetings and see the spies there, sitting in the midst of the other ministers. “We always knew who they were,” he said. Long was surprised. “How did you know? I thought they were secret agents?” The minister replied, “Oh, they were. But we could tell. There was something in their voice that gave them away.”

The fourth Sunday of the Easter season is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. The readings for this particular date often include the 23 Psalm and a section from the gospel of John in which Jesus’ care for his followers is likened to the tender and faithful care of a shepherd. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. His sheep follow him because they know his voice. My sheep know my voice, know me, and believe.”

In a sermon on this passage, Barbara Brown Taylor writes of the discipline of herding and keeping sheep in the time of Jesus. While we might think of sheep as rather simple animals who blindly follow the shepherd, there was actually some intelligence and training involved in the process. Instead of raising sheep for slaughter, sheep of this time and place were raised for their wool. Thus they developed a long relationship with the shepherd. They trusted him to do what was well for them. They had confidence that at the end of the day he would lead them to a good, safe place. At the end of the day, several flocks of sheep would gather at the same watering hole for a drink before their long walk home. The flocks would intermingle as they drank, but the shepherds did not seem to worry about losing one of their own. When the time came, the shepherd would make a distinctive sound, a click of the tongue or a two note whistle, and his sheep would instantly recognize that peculiar sound as their shepherd’s voice. Upon hearing that sound, they would pull away from the watering hole and follow their shepherd home.

The words of the Gospel of John were written to followers of Jesus who were trying to interpret the presence of the Resurrected Christ in the midst of their own situation. John’s community was one of competing voices. Families, villages and places of worship were being torn apart over the question of whether Jesus was the Messiah. Those who believed in Jesus were a beleaguered minority in the face of established tradition of Hebrew thought, perhaps feeling much like vulnerable sheep in

the midst of a pack of wolves. They were looking for the assurance of faith, something to trust as they ventured forth telling and living the story of Easter. They needed the strong reassurance of the voice of the shepherd.

We must admit that sometimes it is difficult to be certain about where we are going in life. Each of us affirm a faith in God but deep inside we still harbor doubts, questions, and reservations. We were fairly certain about the gift of new life as we celebrated it on Easter but three weeks later in the light of the world events and life's uncertainty, we wonder what Easter really means. We tend to distance ourselves from God. There are a plethora of paths to choose from and scores of life choices to make. There are other voices competing for our ears in the corral, the voice of the thief and of the bandit, the noise and confusion of temptation, selfishness, fear and doubt. Sometimes faith isn't as certain as we would like it to be.

But we are here. Despite any doubt or uneasiness, we have heard the call of the shepherd that brings us here into this fellowship, part of the gathered flock. Despite our questions about life we have heard something that sounded like the voice of God directing us to choose truth instead of falsehood, compassion against selfishness, honesty over deceit. Despite our longing for comfort and security we have been moved by a call to serve others to serve good. Most of the time there isn't anything glorious and mighty about it. There was just this voice speaking to our hearts and our souls, directing us to a place of trust where we were created to be. It was the voice of the shepherd who won't let his sheep go.

A couple of years ago I was on my elliptical trainer, pushing myself through the nightly exercise routine, watching a baseball game on the television in front of me, when I heard something quite strange. One of the microphones designed to pick up the crowd noise caught the sound of a woman laughing loudly. Above the sound of the announcers, the umpire, and the beer vendors, I heard it clearly. It sounded exactly like my mother's laugh. Although it had been around six years since she died, it was unmistakable. I didn't say anything. But Laura, who was sitting across the room working on her laptop and paying no attention to the game remarked, "Wow, that sounded just like your mother." It clearly got my attention. The quiet, unexpected voice of the shepherd does the same. It comes when we least expect it. It comes when we are listening to something else. It comes in a familiar soothing manner. It comes in a clear, direct way. It calls us from other places, from our uncertainty, from our darkness- to rest, to reassurance, and to life with purpose. It is a voice of comfort and strength as we struggle to be faithful in difficult times. It is a voice that speaks to us about who we are and of the love of the one who cares so much for us.