

**Bishop's Sermon for Convention Sunday
In Mission For Others - A People Called
April 20, 2008**

Text: John 10:1-11

Grace and peace be unto you from our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

Let us Pray

Gracious God, we are your people, called together in your name.
Strengthen our understanding that we have all been called to do your will in the world
Make us one in spirit and purpose, and move in us to all the world with your love.
Guide us now with your Holy Spirit to hear, to digest, to understand then to embody, and live your Word
as revealed in Jesus Christ. Amen

Jesus uses figures of speech in this Gospel reading; and the disciples – his first followers –
had difficulty understanding what he meant. I suspect we today still have difficulty understanding these
figures.

Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd – the One who lays down his life for the sheep.
Jesus calls his own by name – and when they hear his voice – they follow him.

Jesus further says:

"I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."
(John 10:9)

In the Bible, people are often referred to as sheep. Some people today don't particularly like to be
referred to as sheep because they think that sheep are among the dumbest animals on earth.

Actually sheep are beautiful and useful animals. They are created by God and are quite intelligent.
Unlike cattle they can be led rather than herded. They also have a highly developed sense of voice
recognition.

When I grew up in Medicine Hat, Alberta, my stepfather had a flock of sheep. I would watch with
amazement as he would go outside and call the sheep. Although they were grazing and scattered all over
the field, at the sound of his voice they would immediately come to him. Sometimes I would go out to the
field and try to call the sheep. Although I would try my best to imitate my stepfather's voice, they
wouldn't even look up from their grazing.

A tourist in the Middle East reported watching several shepherds all bringing their flocks of sheep to a
water hole at the same time. To his astonishment, after the sheep had drunk their fill, at the call of their
shepherd, each sheep would return to the flock to which it belonged. The sheep responded and followed
their shepherd because they knew his voice. They had learned to trust him because a good shepherd is
willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

Every night the tourist would see him do that literally. As dusk fell, a shepherd would lead his sheep to a
safe place — either a cave or a walled enclosure where the sheep could be safely sheltered for the night.
The shepherd then would lay down across the opening with his staff in his hand. The shepherd literally
was the gate for the sheepfold. With his staff he would control who would enter or leave.
He was ever watchful to keep the sheep from leaving and predators from entering.

This imagery helps us to understand what Jesus means when he says,
“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)
We are not sheep. We are, however, the people of God, called and claimed by the One who has laid down his life for us — Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

What a wonderful assurance this is — that Jesus, who suffered and died for us and all people, is also the gate to the kingdom of God. What a relief it is to know that I am not the gate which keeps people in or out of the kingdom of God.

I give thanks to God that this role has been assigned to Jesus. Our role is simply to follow Jesus.

We follow him because we trust him. We follow with deep humility, knowing that none of us has a right to be in the sheepfold. We are here because — already in baptism — we heard God calling us: **“a beloved child of God.”** We are here because we believe the promise that nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. We are here because we continue to hear the voice of Jesus who alone can make God — and God's will — known to us. We follow that voice because in Jesus we see as much of God as we ever hope to see in this life.

As we read in the gospel of John:

“The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.” (John 1:17_18)

Jesus, who is close to God's heart — through his life, death and resurrection has made God's heart visible to us. From Jesus we learn that God's heart overflows with love and compassion for the human family.

Jesus' love for the human family frequently brought him into conflict with the religious authorities of his day. Following the heart of God led Jesus to cross the cultural and religious boundaries of his day.

He sought out the poor, the outcast and the disenfranchised. He sat at table with them and welcomed them into the kingdom of God. Because Jesus followed the heart of God — healing the sick on the Sabbath and allowing his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath — he was accused of breaking the law of Moses. Finally, following the heart of God led him before Pontius Pilate to be accused of blasphemy and to be crucified.

What Jesus said and did in his lifetime is our window into the heart of God. Looking into that window I see that we are called to welcome all people into the full life of the church, but especially the poor, the disenfranchised and those who because of their sexual orientation or other reasons feel excluded.

Some may ask: “what then do we make of the passages in scripture which are often seen to suggest otherwise?” For an answer we can only point to Jesus, the Living Word of God. He is the only One who can help us interpret scripture and understand what God's will is for us today.

From Jesus we learn that simply following precepts in the Bible is not enough nor does it make us followers of Jesus. To follow Jesus requires courage. Perhaps, more than courage, it requires trust — trusting that the One who calls us to follow also walks with us.

In his book about Martin Luther King Jr. — “Bearing the Cross” — David Garrow describes a time in Martin Luther King's life when many "strange" voices competed for King's attention — voices of fear, voices of doubt, voices of despair. It was during the Montgomery bus boycott. King and his family were repeatedly threatened with violence. He feared for his family. At home, around midnight, the phone rang.

An anonymous caller shouted a murderous warning:

“If you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out.”

Sitting at his kitchen table worrying about the threat to his children, his wife and himself, he prayed. He confessed to God that he was losing his courage. As he prayed, he heard a voice, **“Martin Luther,”** the voice said, **“stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.”**

King was convinced it was the voice of Jesus . Almost at once his fears and uncertainty disappeared. And the rest is history.

Because Martin Luther King did not listen to the voices who claimed that slavery was the will of God, a black man today has a good chance to be the next president of the United States.

Being obedient to the will of God has its risks. Because Jesus looked into the heart of God and focused his ministry on those texts in scripture which breathed love, and compassion — people who studied the Bible closely and devoted their lives to living according what they made of its teaching, rejected Jesus, accused him before Pilate and crucified him.

I pray that we will have the courage to follow Jesus, and allow the spirit of Christ to continue to call, gather, enlighten and to form us to be the people of God at this time in this place.

If we do that we will be for others a window into the heart of God.

I want to close with a prayer which comes to us from the Anglican Church

Prayer

Reshape us, O Holy God,
until in generosity,
In faith,
and in expectation that the best is yet to come,
we are truly Christ-like.
Make us passionate followers of Jesus
rather than passive supporters.
Make our hearts as well as our churches
places of radical discipleship and signposts to heaven,
then, in us, through us, and _ if need be _ despite us,
let your dream for earth come quickly.

Amen . . . Amen . . Amen

Bishop Gerhard Preibisch