

Easter IV B
April 22, 2018

Grace Church, Lexington
Fr. James
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Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

I John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

The Calling of a Shepherd

Thirty-six years ago on the 25th of April, I was ordained a priest in the the little church of St. Matthew's, McMinnville, Tennessee. It was a night of joy, of music, of love and great fun. Many people planned and worked and baked and ran errands and anticipated to make it an unforgettable occasion. I was grateful.

What was it that was important about that occasion? That the congregation experienced on that night a rare time of unity and love to which we and they as Christians are called? Yes, that was important. Was it that we experienced that ancient sacrament of priesting symbolized by the motion of hand to head and remembering that it has been hand to head for 2000 years back to the Christ himself? Yes, that was important. Was it the personal experience that was mine of stepping into the circle of light behind that altar at the time of the consecration of the Bread and the

Wine? Yes, that was important. Or perhaps, someone in that congregation shared something with another that was an experience of mountain top proportions? All of these possibilities were important, all of them.

But there was something even more important occurring which must not be overlooked and that something was the call of God to each person present at that ordination—the call of God which has been issued to each person here at Grace Church through your baptism. The Bishop's first question to me was, “My brother, do you believe that you are truly called by God and his Church to this priesthood? The call. The church has never lost sight of the call to ministry. A profession, yes; education for ministry, yes, but ask a man or a woman why they are standing for holy orders and more often than not, they will stammer around and finally admit they they felt called—no clear, definable reasons—certainly not for the money, or the good life, or for the excitement of working with people you are bound to disappoint—no it is because of the call. And so it is for each of us in our ministries.

You may look for the best reasons in the world why you are a gospel minister, why you are a Christian, why you have a feeling of responsibility to do something, to be someone for Jesus and when all is said and done you will come up with no better answer. We are a called people.

The Gospel for the ordination was John 10:11-18. Today's Gospel is the very one. Jesus makes the claim, "I am the good shepherd." And then he goes on to describe what that means. The Gospel was chosen for the ordination because it is Jesus' example which is held up to the newly made priest. He is to be a shepherd also.... Desertion is not an option. He or she is not a hireling, but belonging to the flock as much as the flock to the priest. Jesus said, I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father...." Is that just for Jesus? Just for the priest? No. That is your call and your vocation as surely as it was for Jesus. Who is it that relies on you to be the good shepherd?

One of Jesus' most clear identifications with those given to

him by his Father is that he knows his own intimately. They don't all look alike to him. He knows them, and they know and trust him. You have someone for whom you want prayer? That one is also given to you in a special, intimate way. Your responsibility has only begun when you ask prayer for them. We often in Bible study ask a prayer for a particular person. We should be asking, "What do I need to do for them and with them because I know them? Someone close to you have a special difficulty? Is it a child, a spouse, a parent, a friend? They are given to you by God. In some measure you are their shepherd. Will you run from your charge because it is difficult? And if so, to whom will they turn to see the Christ? Who will enable them to move from the worn-out to the greener pasture? Who is it that relies on you to be the good shepherd?"

I used to have an Old English Sheep dog with the name of Merry Pranks. One year on Easter, Merry Pranks went berserk. We had a lamb roast that Sunday, and my wife had prepared it and put it on to cook, and then decided to brush the dog. As she began

brushing the dog, Merry Pranks ran out of the house, and refused to re-enter—for a week she refused to re-enter the house. We had never experienced anything like it. I was conjuring up all kinds of problems trying to understand why that dog wouldn't come into the house. She wouldn't eat from her dish even if that dish were put out across the yard where she insisted on staying. She wouldn't eat, hadn't eaten for a week. She would stand out there and look wild-eyed toward the house. If she did come close to the house, she would at some point turn and bolt, running way back up on the lawn of the three acre lot the rectory shared with the church. I'd never seen her act so. The next Sunday afternoon my daughter Tamara was home from school in Nashville, as was common on the weekends, and we were discussing Merry Pranks odd, seemingly inexplicable behavior at the dinner table and simultaneously watching her in her position 200 or 300 feet from the house. What was it? Twelve year-old Tamara gave us the clue. “Well, Dad, after all she is a sheep dog.” The lamb! My wife had the smell of the lamb on her hands when she started brushing her!

We put lamb and gravy in her dog bowl after that meal. The lamb, of course. The smell of the cooking lamb, and the cooked lamb, drove her away. We immediately washed her dog bowl and took it to her with food in it. She ate ravenously and soon came back into the house. Selected for scores of generations to avoid taking sheep as food, 100 years after her progenitors had herded sheep she still goes wild at the smell! I can imagine those dogs, bred to look after sheep, bred to look like the sheep, bred to defend and herd, but never to take advantage, never, never, never....That is illustrative of the strength of the care of the Good Shepherd for the sheep. Except that the Good Shepherd does not inherit this love, he wills to care for the sheep, and he or she must determine to do so. Such determination is not genetically programmed.

This is illustrative of the responsibility of the priest. It is also illustrative of your call to minister to each other and to those others outside this fold. We are all sheep; we are all shepherds; we are all called of God.

Know this: the Lord himself is God;

he himself has made us, and we are his;

we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

For the Lord is good;

His mercy is everlasting;

And his faithfulness endures from age to age.

And so must ours. Let us pray: O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads. *Amen.*