

Easter 4C

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

April 25, 2010

Acts 9:36—43

Psalm 23

Revelation 7:9—17

John 10:22-30

Several years ago the *New York Times* ran an article about Dolly Parton and the amusement park she founded in 1986. For those who are not country music fans, Dollywood – the name of Dolly Parton's theme park – is located in her hometown of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. It's got rides and attractions and restaurants and shows, just like you'd expect.

But the article wasn't really about the theme park itself. It was about the people who have found refuge there. People like Thomasina Bicer, a 50-something-year-old employee at the park. Thomasina first visited Dollywood from her hometown of Williamstown, New Jersey in 1994, at a time when life wasn't working well for her. There she found what she called a “peace haven” that changed her life. She said, “I was on five different medications for high blood pressure and depression, and after I got back from here and listened to her songs, I went off the medicines completely. Doctors asked me what happened, and I said, 'Dolly did that to me.'”

Thomasina visited the park six or seven times a year for the next seven years, and then moved from New Jersey to Tennessee and began working at the park. Soon after she wrote Dolly a thank-you note. “I told her that she saved my life. If it wasn't for her making a peaceful, loving place to calm me, I would have gotten sicker.” She never did hear back from the star, but that doesn't bother her. “Dolly's a very busy person,” she explains.

As it turns out, Thomasina's experience is not unusual. Hundreds of Dollywood employees and thousands of Pigeon Forge residents feel the same way about the singer. One observer attributes the phenomenon to Dolly's “authentic accessibility.” Now, authentic probably isn't the first word that comes to mind when you think of Dolly Parton, but whatever it is, people are drawn to it. Even though she makes only two appearances a year at Dollywood, the people there feel that she knows them and cares for them personally. Like Thomasina, many would say that their relationship with Dolly has saved their lives, in one way or another.

But the thing that caught my attention about the story, and the reason I begin with it this morning, was the headline: “St. Dolly and Her Flock.” The writer is suggesting that Dolly is like a shepherd to the residents of Pigeon Forge.¹

¹ Michael Joseph Gross, “St. Dolly and Her Flock,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/26/arts/music-st-dolly-and-her-flock.html?pagewanted=1>, downloaded 4/24/2010.

The Dollywood phenomenon speaks to the universal human longing to be known and cared for by someone – someone important and powerful, like a movie star, an athlete, a politician. Why else do people collect autographs or have their pictures taken with famous people? And the more important or powerful that someone is, the greater the sense of security and significance, even when the so-called relationship is just an illusion.

There's nothing wrong with that longing. In fact, I would suggest it's essential to the human condition, that it was placed there by God himself. It's nice to find some measure of comfort and belonging in a place called Dollywood. But ultimately those longings can only be fulfilled in a relationship with Jesus Christ, who calls himself the Good Shepherd.

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Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.” Now maybe that doesn't strike you as such an outrageous claim. What's so unusual about a spiritual leader describing himself as a shepherd?

Well, two things. First of all, Jesus was identifying himself as a very special servant of God Almighty. In the Old Testament, the shepherd was a very common metaphor for describing God's relationship to Israel.

Second, when Jesus began using this shepherd imagery so liberally, and applying it directly to himself, the people listening understood what he was suggesting – that he was, in fact, the Messiah. That's why they were so alarmed. For an uneducated carpenter from Nazareth to be making such a claim was outrageous!

But Jesus' claim to be the Good Shepherd is outrageous on another level, as well. It's outrageous to suggest that God Almighty, even his Messiah, should have such an intimate, personal, and attentive relationship with his people. Notice again the language Jesus uses to describe himself: he knows, he cares, he calls, he leads, he lays down his life. Could God Almighty, King of the Universe, Maker of Heaven and Earth – really know and care so intimately for every one of his people?

It was hard for his hearers to accept, and it's hard for us to accept even today. Dr. Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, wrote a book entitled, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*.² In his book he surveys the various “images” of Jesus that have been popularized in our country's history:

- Thomas Jefferson's view of Jesus as an enlightened sage;
- The sweet, sentimental savior of the late nineteenth century;
- The scrappy, manly Jesus portrayed by baseball player-turned-evangelist

Billy Sunday in the early twentieth century;

² Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003).

- The hippie-rebel of the 1960's, Jesus Christ Superstar;
- The radical rabbi of contemporary liberalism.

Prothero points out how each generation tends to view Jesus in terms of its cultural setting. But he makes it clear that the common thread running through American Christianity, and evangelicalism in particular, is the personal Jesus. What he calls “the daily life Jesus.” “What Would Jesus Do?” we ask, as if Jesus really wants to be a part of our everyday lives, as if he cares. There it is again – that yearning for someone who knows, who understands, who cares.

It's all very comforting, and very American, Prothero would say. But is it a biblical idea? Is it reasonable to believe that God Almighty should be so intimately acquainted and involved with every one of us on a personal level? Is it possible that you and I could matter that much to God?

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Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

Tim Laniak, a professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, spent several months on sabbatical in the Middle East, living with shepherds – sleeping in their tents, tending their flocks, and asking all kinds of questions. One of his big questions was, Is it really true that the shepherd knows each sheep individually?

The owner of a large flock, a couple of thousand sheep, looked at him as if he was crazy when Laniak asked this question. He replied, “Of course I do. How could I be their shepherd if I don't know them? I know the year the sheep was born, the circumstances of its birth. I know if it's broken any bones. I know which diseases it's susceptible to, which foods it doesn't digest well. I know which animals it doesn't get along with. I know its temperament—if it tends to wander or fight or follow.” So apparently a shepherd really *does* intimately know each and every one of his flock.

But is that true of Jesus, too? Can we believe him when he says, “I know my sheep?” It's certainly true when we meet him in the Gospels. Remember when a seeker named Nathaniel came to meet Jesus? As they approached, Jesus said, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” Jesus knew that a fisherman named Simon had leadership potential. He knew the woman at the well had been married five times and was living with a man who wasn't her husband. Jesus knew the rich young ruler had a problem with money. He knew the religious leaders were turning him over out of envy.

Jesus knew people. And he knows you. He knows the circumstances of your birth, and the bones you've broken, and who you get along with, and what temptations you're vulnerable to. He knows what you did last night. He knows what's worrying you about the week to come. How could he be your shepherd, if he doesn't know you?

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

In the western world, shepherds walk behind the flock, as do also the sheep dogs that they use. However, in the world of the Middle East, the shepherd walks ahead of the flock and blows on a whistle or makes a noise that the sheep recognize – and then follow. And, when two or three shepherds decide they would like to spend some time talking with each other, their respective flocks mix together. When the shepherds go their own way once again, they simply make the traditional call or sound, and the flock divides with each sheep following the sound of its own shepherd.³

There are lots of “voices” out there crying out for our attention. We live in a noise-filled world. Televisions blare at us in the checkout lines at Wal-Mart. Advertising and billboards fill the streets we drive down. Then there is the self-inflicted noise from mobile phones, radios, MP3 players, and more.

³ Harry Wendt, Exegetical notes on *April 25, Easter 4: John 10:22-30*.

Somewhere in the din is the voice of Jesus. So in this noise-filled world, how will we hear him calling our names? How can you create a quiet space, not just on Sunday morning, but in all of life, to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling out to you?

But what's more, we all want to be heard. We want to know there's someone who will care for us, who knows our needs and will attend to them, someone who will offer us comfort when we're hurting and guidance when we're lost.

That's why every night of the week tens of millions of people tune their radios to listen to a radio host named Delilah. She's America's #1 nighttime radio personality. She hosts a musical call-in show every night from 7-12, offering people a listening ear, helpful advice, sometimes even a gentle rebuke. Delilah says that her show is a “safety zone where listeners take off their armor, slip into a 'Mr. Rogers' cardigan, sit around the electronic hearth and share their secrets.” Every night people call in wanting to talk about their troubles, about some disappointment in life, some foolish decision they've made, some relationship that is or isn't working for them. Why do they call? Because they believe that she cares, that she can help.

There it is again – that yearning for someone who knows, who understands, who cares. Perhaps we'd all be better off if we'd tune out all those “voices” that vie for our attention so that we could better tune in to the one who is already calling to us.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He stopped at nothing to care for us. He laid down his life for his sheep. He knows us intimately, knows all of our needs, and wants to care for us, if we would only let him. Listen for his voice, and let him listen to you.

Amen.

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