

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn
“Good Miss Murphy”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, May 3, 2020

John 10:1-10

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths
for his name’s sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

Let us pray. May we hear your voice. May we hear your voice, O God, in these words that we have read from your word. May your spirit come through in the words that I share this morning. May we be brought together by your spirit across the distance, across the miles. We pray all of this in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

The 23rd Psalm. Surely it is one of the most recited, most familiar passages in all of scripture, certainly in all of the book of Psalms. These words have been a source of comfort to many of us at various times. These words have been set to a number of different musical arrangements, one of which we heard this morning. It was really lovely. Thank you. And there is a story that has circulated around. It does have some basis in fact, in reality. Maybe you've heard this story, I don't know, but it's about a little boy named Paul.

Now Paul was a very serious first grader. He was always striving to do his best. He worked very hard. He was earnest. And in large part that was because he did have a hearing difficulty. And sometimes others around him, sometimes even his teachers, sometimes even his parents, sometimes his friends, would get impatient with him when he wasn't understanding them, when he wasn't hearing them. However, his Sunday school teacher, a woman named Miss Murphy, his Sunday school teacher was, it seems, always kind and generous and gracious with him. And above all, she was always patient with him, being very much aware of his hearing difficulty.

So at one point, she patiently taught him the words of this Psalm. The 23rd Psalm. And when he felt like he had it memorized, he was so excited and he hurried home, because he wanted to recite it in front of his mother. He hurried home. He got in front of his mother in the kitchen, excitement plus. And as he spoke, he repeated it perfectly, until he got to the last verse and it was with tremendous excitement and pride and hope that when he got to the last verse, he said, "Surely, good Ms. Murphy will follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the

Lord forever. Surely, good Ms. Murphy will follow me all the days of my life," and why not? Why not? Why wouldn't this little boy? Why wouldn't that be his prayer and his hope? This boy, who had been shown such patience and kindness by Ms. Murphy, in a sense he was being shepherded by this woman, welcomed through the gate, if you will, the gate of human compassion and grace and love, welcomed by the Sunday school teacher good Ms. Murphy. "Surely, good Ms. Murphy will follow me all the days of my life."

Periodically, it is true, is it not? Periodically, we all need a good Ms. Murphy in our life. When we are facing difficulties with thorny issues that confront us, when we have lost a loved one, when we are fearful of financial stress or even fearful of financial ruin, when we are fearful of disease as so many are today, we want and we need a good Ms. Murphy, a good Ms. Murphy type shepherd who might go the extra mile with us when we need it, who might give us a word of comfort or a word of encouragement, who might sit with us in silence when there is really nothing to say or very little that can be said. A good Ms. Murphy.

The psalms begins with these words, "The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd leading me into green pastures and leading me into-- beside still waters and leading me in the paths of righteousness. The Lord is my shepherd, my leader, the one whom I will follow," Jesus, in our gospel lesson, is the gatekeeper, the good shepherd, the one who gathers his followers, his sheep, the one who has come that we might have life and have it abundantly and thus it seems to me if we are a follower of Jesus, if we are disciples of Jesus, then at times we not only are the ones who are led into green pasture and led beside the still waters, the ones who at times need comfort and care in times of stress or loneliness or disease. The ones, sometimes we need to be gathered together, gathered together for protection as a flock of sheep might be gathered together. We are sometimes in need of that kind of comfort. But we also at times are called upon to be a good Ms Murphy for someone else. Called upon by the spirit of God to be the shepherd, to be the caregiver.

Some years back, I came across an article in the newspaper by a columnist named Mike Barnicle. You might be familiar with him. He's a commentator from the city of Boston. He often appears on NBC news programs. Well, on this occasion he wrote a column for the newspaper and it was a true story about two Boston families. Two families who each had their sons in the cancer ward at Children's Hospital. One a 9-year-old, the other a 10-year-old. But both boys were desperately fighting cancer. And to compound that, the father of the nine-year-old had just been laid off by one of those high tech companies that were in Boston. The other family was trust-fund wealthy.

But that social fact, that social fact did not keep the two families from becoming very very good friends, as together they shared the worry that each one of them had about their sons, the care that each one gave to their sons. And at the same time, the two boys became very good hospital friends. Now, it just so happened that both boys loved baseball. And of course, being residents of Boston, their team was the Boston Red Sox. So they would listen together to the play-by-play on the broadcast of the Boston Red Sox, even as they could look out of their window at the lights of Fenway Park in the distance.

One day, the more wealthy family of the 10-year-old was deeply, deeply touched by the family and the parents of the nine-year-old, as those parents presented both boys with Red Sox jackets and two baseballs signed by one of the Red Sox star players, Mo Vaughn. They were beside themselves with excitement.

But alas, on a clear crisp fall day, the nine-year-old succumbed to cancer and died. And the combination of all of those days of hospitalization and worry and death, and then unemployment had devastated and nearly bankrupted that family. But they had to continue forward on behalf of their three other children. So the father did find a job in a variety store. Of course, at much less wage than he had been getting before, but it was a job. However, it was also a struggle. And one morning when it was looking particularly bleak when their home was on the verge of foreclosure, the mother went to the mailbox and found a letter from the family of the 10-year-old. The letter began, "We will never forget the kindness that you showed our son at Children's." And then the letter continued, "We are so fortunate. Our son is doing well. But we heard about your difficulty from a nurse and we want you to accept what we have sent. Your son gave a lot to ours. And we think about him and we still hear his beautiful voice when we watch the Red Sox singing his favorite song, The Star-Spangled Banner. You gave to us, now it's time for our family to give in return. May God bless you." And inside that envelope was a check for \$10,000. "Not that it matters," he wrote, "But the family who sent the check is white and the parents who lost the child is black." Perhaps on many levels, of course, it does not matter.

We are finally all human beings in this life together we are finally one. But in our divided land divided in so many ways, racially, culturally, social class, politically, I think perhaps it does matter in some very important ways. In fact, the whole incident matters. The friendship of these two families brought together by illness and by struggle, the giving-- please notice the giving of each of those families one to another. And I would submit that this giving on the part of each of these families does not just happen willy nilly, it happens most of the time because of conscious decisions, to listen to the voice of compassion and giving, above all other voices. To listen, to overlook difference, and to come together as one, to hear, after all, the voice of Jesus, the call of Jesus to enter the gate. To hear the call of Jesus, to be willing to lead The Lord be our Shepherd leading us yes into green pastures and still waters, but also leading us into paths of righteousness. So that indeed sometimes we are called to be the shepherd. And at times, we are called to be the sheep. At times we are the one who serves the other, at times, other times, the one who receives. At times, to be the good Miss Murphy, and other times to be the recipient of that goodness and mercy. Amen.