**“I heard the Voice of Jesus Say…”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

Good Shepherd Sunday, April 21, 2013

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

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

Six years ago, the bishop of New Jersey gave me an ordination present. It’s a print of a new Yorker cartoon that now hangs in my office. There’s no caption, just the picture – of a half dozen or so sheep kind of looking around scattered and confused in a grassy field. They all look the same, equally kind of confused. The only difference is that one of them is wearing a T-Shirt with the word Staff on it. I have to admit that I’m not quite sure why this cartoon is funny, except in the context of being an ordination present.

But in that context it makes perfect sense. After all, the sheep wearing the funny T-shirt is just as lost and confused as the rest. And of course, the most accurate part is that none of the other sheep are actually following him, or really listening even! Ok, maybe that’s not so accurate at St. Paul’s….but I’ve heard that’s what happens at some OTHER congregations I know.

Today in the life of the church is called Good Shepherd Sunday. Always the fourth Sunday of Easter, we call it Good Shepherd Sunday because each year the Gospel is one of the passages from John about sheep. This Sunday always make me think of the cartoon in my office. Because as funny as the cartoon is, when you think about it as an ordination gift, it is also making a theological point about relationship between clergy and lay people. At the end of the day, we are all sheep – and the only thing that’s fundamentally any different about me or any other priest, is that some of the time we wear somewhat different cloths. We have the same challenges, the same struggles, the same joys, the same questions, the same doubts, and, most importantly, the same shepherd. And here’s a hint. It’s not me.

Clergy of course are prone to forgetting this truth from the time to time. But then, every once in a while, we have day that reminds us that we too are sheep: just as confused, scared, and lost as everyone else. I had one of those days on Friday.

It was my day off, so I got kind of a slow start. But by about 9 o’clock I’d clued into the fact that something very unusual was happening. I turned on the TV and opened up my laptop -- only to fall into a kind of black hole for most of the next 7 hours, as I watched the manhunt for the marathon bombing suspects play out. I’d like to think that the reason I spent about eight hours, off and on, but mostly on, moving back and forth between CNN and CNN.com, was because I used to live in Watertown. I’d like to think that it was because the tiny little street I lived on until about 2 years ago was where the missing suspect ditched his shot out car and fled on foot into someone’s boat two blocks down the road. I’d like to think it was because the pictures of SWAT teams and ATF officers standing on the roofs of restaurants and convenience stores were the places Kristen and I used to get late night pints of Ben and Jerry’s and have our date nights.

But I’m not sure that’s true. At least, that’s not the whole truth of it. I think the reason this story paralyzed me for the better part of a day is because I felt so helpless, so out of control, so angry, and so sad. Actually, I’d been feeling this way all week, since Monday’s explosions at the Marathon. But I’m not sure I’d given those feelings any real room to come to the surface all week, until my day off.

As I kind of drifted from the living room to the kitchen and up to the office, and then back downstairs, a cacophony of voices, sounds, words and images – the radio, the various TV channels, the internet, live twitter feeds, you get the idea – filled my day. For the most part, these voices fed my sense of hopelessness, anger, sadness, and even fear. I guess I kept watching because that’s how I was feeling and the coverage validated those feelings – which needed such validation – and so I sought out the voices that affirmed my own insecurities.

Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.”

What was the voice of Jesus trying to say to us on Friday? I think it depends on where you were. To those hurt or killed by the explosions, and to those terrified residents of all those two-families in East Watertown, I think he was saying, “Remember, you’ve done everything you can. Whatever happens, it will be ok, and I love you.” To the frustrated office worker in Boston, stuck without the T and without a cab, I think the voice was saying, “Hey, relax, it’s not about you. I love you, but today, really, it’s not about you.” To the young man whose horrific crimes started and extended this terribly violence I think Jesus’ voice was saying, “Give yourself up. Now. I love you, and you have to stop hurting people.”

And to me, well, I couldn’t really hear what Jesus’ voice was saying to me on Friday or any other day last week. But on Saturday, I think I figured it out. Where I was -- physically outside the danger zone but with my heart and so many years of my life planted firmly within it -- I think Jesus’ voice was saying, “You know what, be angry, be sad, but don’t be afraid, and don’t be insecure. You are not helpless. Remember, I love you.”

The good shepherd reminds me, and indeed all of us, that we don’t have to get rid of our sadness and anger. After all, Jesus felt sadness and anger. And he didn’t just have those feelings, he used them as part of his ministry. He used them as motivation and as inspiration – to heal those in need, like Lazarus for whom he wept, to cleans the temple, and most importantly, to forgive from the Cross, even in his own moment of deepest terror.

How will we use our own emotional reactions to the violence of the past week in our own ministry and personal mission? How will we respond to our own victimization? Already in our region, some have chosen to respond to violence with violence – threatening people in their own community who look and pray differently. These people are understandably hurt; and in their pain they cannot hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, who says, to the very people who abandoned him, “Peace be with you.” Who returned violence with forgiveness, showing us that this is the only pathway to true healing. Luckily so many more people in our communities *have* heard Jesus’ voice calling us to a respond actively and peacefully.

If “peace be with you” seems too formal to really be the voice of Jesus today, perhaps Jesus is speaking to us through the words of 8 year old Martin Richard, who was killed Monday by one of the Marathon bombs. One of his Sunday School projects was creating a poster that simply read, “No more hurting people, Peace.” We could choose to hear this plea as the voice of a naïve child, perhaps simply following the lead of a parent or teacher. Or we could choose to hear these words as the voice of Jesus calling us to respond to violence with a determined commitment to peace.

An active intention to be an agent of peace in a violent world requires trust. And trust is hard to rebuild after it has been broken. But here’s the thing. As people of faith, we don’t trust that nothing bad will ever happen to us again. There’s really nothing in our scriptures or the history of our spiritual ancestors that would lead us to believe that. Rather, as people of faith, we trust that no matter what happens to us, Jesus will always be our shepherd, and his voice will forever lead all of us towards the realm of peace and compassion. May we, and may this whole world of sheep, open our hearts to hear his voice calling us, through our sadness and our pain to be instruments of peace, forgiveness, compassion, and love. Amen.