

John 10:22

The Body of Christ

The Rev. Julia A. Fritts

Psalm 23

April 25, 2010

Revelation 7: 9-17

Holy God, may only your word be spoken; only your word heard. In the name of the One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning, my Family! It is a beautiful one, and as life so often is, one full to the brim with a big mix of joy and sadness, especially today on my last day here as your priest. We have shook our heads in wonder together many times over the past two years, haven't we - seeing God's hand in our lives, and marveling at the absolute truth that life on earth is not for sissies. Trusting God is a bold thing to do, and today we celebrate our mutual courage in saying yes to what God has planned next for all of us.

Our scripture brings us into the same message of trust through the powerful imagery of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. We've pondered what it is to know him as our shepherd; how it is to discern his voice; what it means to trust him, and follow him. And it occurs to me in a new way that the life required to follow him is a life not of steady consistent comfort, but of readiness, of mobility, and of trust, moving forward into the unknown. Maybe it's no problem for a little lamb, or even for a big burly sheep, to follow their shepherd through every climb and valley. But for me, and I would guess for many of us, being constantly ready to move forward into unknown territory is a hard thing. We can't do it unless we have real trust in the One who calls us.

And so I wonder. As I prepare to leave you, with all the love and concern that I have for each of you, I wonder how you are with your trust of God. Those whom I've had the privilege of working closely with are familiar with this question – it might be, for me, the most important question of all, and so I ask it now. Do you trust God?

Like so many, I share a strong affinity for images of Jesus as my shepherd, and me as his lamb. I have a beautiful icon over my desk at home that I've carried with me for years that I joke about – I say it's my family photo. It's an image of Jesus, with a woolly white lamb securely wrapped around his neck: his hands snugly holding the front feet and back feet, the lamb's head resting securely on his shoulder. That lamb is me, and sometimes, just like that lamb, I have to just tuck in tight to feel his secure hold. There's another image that I dearly love, in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd at my seminary in New York City. It is the most beautiful statue I've ever seen of Jesus, tenderly holding a small lamb in one arm, with another larger sheep in mid-trot at his side. Sometimes in my life I feel strong enough to be that larger lamb trotting confidently at his side, but most of the time I'm that smaller one, needing a tighter hold. That is what it means to me to trust him: it doesn't mean I am just fine on my own; it means I have to be as close as I possibly can in order to move forward in freedom and confidence. It's a paradox, isn't it, to need absolute holding in order to step out boldly.

Trusting in Jesus the Christ to guide us and guard us is our sure foundation, it is the ground under our feet. So how do we develop this most necessary thing?

Let's think about how we develop trust in anyone. It is, of course, all about relationship. We are called into relationship with Jesus *by him*. Every time we think of him, or feel the need to talk to him, this is simply our half, the answering half, of the equation: he has already called us, and we have the free choice to respond, or not. We are loved beyond measure, whether we love him back or not. But every time we call on him for help, and in time look back to see the help that we were given, our trust develops. Just like in any relationship, we have to communicate honestly, and we have to be patient sometimes. God's timing is an awesome and mysterious thing, and that is something we learn over time, and with practice, to trust as well.

So here we are this morning, the flock of St. John's Episcopal Church in Stamford, Connecticut. One little flock of many. A group of the most faithful, most resilient, and most loving people that I have ever known. You have seen me through all of my firsts: my first time as a Deacon at your altar. My ordination to the priesthood, with your love and support as palpable as the Holy Spirit was on that day. My first celebration of the Eucharist; my first blessing. My first baptism, anointing, birth, wedding, death, funeral, burial...all of my firsts as a priest have been here with you, held in your support as *you* shepherded *me*. It has been my deepest honor to have shared life with you, and to have been given your trust and confidence. And now as is the nature of being part of Jesus' flock, we are all called to move in a new direction.

We as people of God are constantly being challenged and formed and called and sent, to move forward into the next new territory. This is what it means to be his flock: this is what it is to be his Body. Like a moving herd, like a beautiful flower gone to seed, like a sparrow strong enough to fly, we are meant to go where we're led. We gather together to be fed and strengthened, and then sent out into the world to be the Body of Christ: as Mother Theresa said, it is our hands, and our feet, that are all Jesus has to do his work in the world now, until he comes again. It is our challenge to be his Body in the world, to practice his charge to speak the truth in love, and to mature into the most radical direction of all, one that we pray every time we celebrate the Eucharist: that the Prince of Peace, the King of Creation, may dwell in us, and we in him.

To come into life more fully as People of The Way, we are challenged to love; to communicate; to trust. These are our practices; this is what all of our disciplines are about: relationship with God. And it is just these rhythms of life, this closer walk with God through every climb and valley, that matures our trust, strengthens our core.

So trust that trust will grow. Practice the important art of relationship building, with God and with each other. Speak what is true, and speak it with kindness: like Philo, the ancient philosopher of Alexandria, who said, "*Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.*" Jesus the Great Shepherd of the sheep taught us with his very life that it is all about love, and trust, and truth.

So let's look to the future, where we will all, at times, need the firm hand of Jesus holding us; where at other times we'll be able to trot along confidently at his side; and where we will all, either way,

with God's help, be made capable of moving out into the world to be his Body. And in the mysterious paradox of love, let us offer ourselves in our own small ways to be, like him, willingly broken open for the sake of his wider presence, shared for the sake of love, for the whole world.

Amen.

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Last sermon for St. John's Episcopal Church

Stamford, Connecticut