

Anna V. Ostenso Moore Homily
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Edina
April 22, 2018 – 4th Sunday of Easter, Year B
John 10:11-18

Good morning. I am grateful to be with you all this Sunday. The last time I preached in this sanctuary was nineteen years ago at the Sunday morning worship service that honored high school graduates. For those who it is too early to do math, that was 1999, and I am thirty-seven years old.

I have spent the majority of those years in Minneapolis and Edina. As a result, I have had very little experience with sheep and shepherds. I know sheep are cute and they produce wool. I don't know how to get one sheep to follow me, let alone a flock. And so, I've always had a hard time entering into Good Shepherd Sunday, which falls every year on the fourth Sunday in Easter – today.

To access today's gospel from John, I had to jump back in the sacred story to an earlier chapter. The passage we heard is cut out of a larger story. At the beginning of chapter nine the disciples are asking Jesus if a man, who was born blind, was blind because of his own sins or the sins of his parents. Sin as the cause of blindness was an accepted belief at the time. Jesus says neither and heals the man and restores his sight.

The neighbors start to notice that the formerly-blind man now has his sight. Then the religious leaders start to notice. There is lots of consternation, questioning, and

confusion – how can someone heal blindness? The interrogations eventually lead the religious leaders to Jesus. And the questions begin again, this time of Jesus, the man who restores sight.

From this story and others that precede it in John, it is clear that Jesus is not following the cultural and religious expectations and rules of his day. He is different. He challenges rules. He leaves everyone wondering and whispering, “Who is Jesus?”

In many ways that is still our question today as followers of Jesus.

The Good Shepherd passage we hear is the second part of Jesus response to the religious leaders questions about the blind man’s healing.

I was confirmed at St. Stephen’s, although I grew up in a few different churches. I had a sense of God from childhood, but not always the tools to describe God.

I remember being excited to begin confirmation class in eighth grade. At the time my family and I were at a large church that had several confirmation classes of six students and one adult; three girls to three boys. My teacher had a deep faith. He gave of his time generously. He wanted to impart his religious knowledge as he and

the church understood it. He was not there to wonder, challenge, or discuss why the church's expectations were what they were.

I have always had a deep need to question. Question and wonder are my ways to understanding and integration of faith. At that time, I had questions with which I was really wrestling:

- I was wrestling with the limitations this church put on women's leadership.
- I was wrestling with the exclusion of gay and lesbian people from membership.
- I was wrestling with the requirement to confess to a priest.

The general response to all of my questions as I heard them was, "That's the way it is."

My teacher's understanding of God was so exactly defined by religious doctrine that it felt like he put a wall around God that I could not get through, over, or under. That wall limited God's ability to work and move in his life. I felt this separation from God deeply, and so I asked to switch to another class. The head person said no because it would mess up the boy to girl ratio.

Instead of switching, I left.

That following summer a friend introduced me to some of the youth and youth leaders here. By that point I had my questions ready. Not only were they answered in ways that allowed me to near God, they were also answered with respect.

I headed home and told my parents I was joining St. Stephen's.

Through my four years here until graduation, through TEC (like the retreat happening this weekend), through the relationships that continue still today, the wall around God came down. I was allowed to question. I was allowed to wonder. My own limiting notions of God were challenged. As a result my faith grew in terms of who God is and who I am as a follower of Jesus.

In Jesus day the life of a shepherd was not idyllic. Shepherds were often rough around the edges, on the outskirts of mannered society, and not in a position of societal power. Jesus – this man who heals, who claims a deep relationship with God, who may even be the messiah – how can he compare himself to a lowly shepherd?

In today's Sacred Story, I hear that Jesus did **not** come to be defined by cultural understanding of authority and power. Jesus did not come to be put in a box and tied with a neat bow.

In today's Sacred Story, I hear that Jesus came to challenge us.

Jesus came to give us sight to see the world as he does.

Jesus came to be in relationship with us.

Jesus came to bring us and others to him, calling us each with his voice.

Reading today's gospel within its full story, I hear that Jesus came to shake things up.

This is good news.

As followers of Jesus, our questions become:

How do we respond?

How is Jesus challenging us?

Where do we like the religious leaders of his time need to give up our notions that keep us from God and have our sight restored?

In this Easter, may we not only celebrate Jesus' resurrection, but also wonder about these questions. And in the wondering near the Good Shepherd who shakes things up and calls us to his side.