

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
April 30, 2023
Year A, Easter 4
Thankful Shepherds
The Rev. Leyla King

Acts 2:42-47
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

O God, give me the strength to get through this last sermon without sobbing uncontrollably, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I chose this day as my last Sunday as your rector with intention. On the fourth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate Christ as the Good Shepherd. And, over the years, this day has become my favorite annual celebration at Thankful.

We are still squarely in the season of Easter, but while Easter Day tends to be joyfully packed with people and the love we share with all in Christ Jesus, on Good Shepherd Sunday, the folks in the pews are usually the Thankful Ones I know and love so well as our own little parish family. In past years, we have baptized a host of our Thankful children – many of whom still show up most Sundays – welcoming new members into this beloved community. In an organic way, we have come to make Good Shepherd Sunday a day when we are reminded of our unique identity as *Thankful* Christians. And so, it seemed fitting to celebrate and remember today, of all days, my identity as a *Thankful* priest – no matter where my own path takes me from here.

And, this day seems a fitting day to say farewell to you all because Good Shepherd Sunday reminds us that we are all sheep of one and the same flock; we all belong to the one who is “the shepherd and guardian of [our] souls.” And I need that reminder today. I need to remember that no matter the distance between us and despite the fact that we can no longer participate together in that intimate relationship between priest and people, we still and always belong to each other in God’s family. In Christ Jesus, our shepherd, our gatekeeper and even the gate itself, we still get to commune with one another. And every time I participate in the Eucharistic feast from now on, I can take comfort in the fact that I am sharing the table with you, my dear Thankful Ones.

But, mostly, I chose this day as my last among you because the imagery of sheep and shepherd seemed a particularly fitting one as we mark the end of our pastoral relationship and celebrate the abundant good fruit that that relationship has produced over the past 13.5 years.

After all, it is often said that a priest or pastor of a congregation serves as the shepherd of her flock, a sort of mini-model of Christ the Good Shepherd of us all. And I hope and trust that I have been that for you, my dear Thankful Ones. I have tried, to the best of my ability and by the grace of God, to lead us in the devotion of ourselves “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers,” and it has been one of the deepest joys and privileges of my life to see how our commitment to God and one another through these devotions has resulted in the “glad and generous hearts” that this community cultivates among all who come in contact with you. What a gift that has been. And I thank God that I got this amazing opportunity to shepherd this community for this season.

But, if I have served you as a model of Christ the Good Shepherd, it is at least equally true that you have been my shepherds, too. As a community, as a whole, over the past decade-plus you have been

with me, encouraging and sustaining me, shaping and forming me into the priest who stands before you today. You have shown me the “green pastures” of my ministry among you and quenched my thirst for community beside the “still waters” of your friendship and love. When the way has been hard or I felt less than valued by others, serving alongside of you has “revive[d] my soul” and helped me find my way again on the “right pathway” along which God has called me. And in those times when I have found myself in that “valley of the shadow of death,” you always showed up, like a beacon of light, like the rod and staff of the Lord’s very self, to strengthen and comfort me. “You have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.”

Indeed, for all these many years, so many times, over and over, it has been in *your* voices that I have heard Jesus calling *my* name and it is by the strength and support you have given me that I have found the grace to follow where He leads. If I have been your shepherd, dear ones, how much more so have you been mine.

And my prayer for you now is that you never forget that capacity that is one of your greatest gifts. Always remember that there is grace enough here, grace abundant here, in this place, among you Thankful Ones, to shepherd one another through whatever God calls you to next. There is grace abundant here to continue the good and holy work we have begun together thus far. There is grace abundant here to shepherd whomsoever is lucky enough to be your next shepherd.

May God bless you, that you may continue to be the sacrament of God’s blessing to others that you have so graciously been to me, my most beloved Thankful Ones. Amen.