

## **The Hired Hand**

The Reverend Mary E. Conroy  
Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
Fourth Sunday of Easter  
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It is the first Sunday in May and this month always seems filled with special occasions and events: May Day, the Kentucky Derby, the New York Yankees first visit of the season, the Walk for Hunger, and Mother's Day not to mention the graduations, confirmations, and weddings that are on each of our calendars. We are very close that most sacred holiday, held dear by so many New Englanders, Memorial Day. A name at whose mention we think of the start of summer and long sunny days. And speaking of sunny days, we had some great ones this past week, didn't we? People were smiling, friendly, and the sidewalks of Boston were filled with three things: tourists, babies in strollers and dogs. There were big dogs and small dogs. Well behaved dogs and not so well behaved dogs.

In his bestselling book Marley and Me, John Grogan tells of life with a wild not-so-well behaved yellow lab named Marley. Over and over again Grogan and his family try to train their unruly, lovable animal but to no avail. At one point, they were even kicked out of obedience school. The instructors departing words to Grogan were these, "I think your dog is still a little young for structured obedience training. He's simply not ready for this, he has some growing up to do." (p. 65) Holy Scripture says very little about dogs let alone dog training. There are only a few references such as Lazarus wounds being licked by dogs, or the housedogs getting the crumbs. Dogs do not get much mention in Holy Scripture, but sheep sure do! I know little about dogs and even less about sheep so these are often complicated texts. Complicated, it seems because we are always trying to figure out just where we fit in the text.

In the collect we prayed at the start of the service these words were said on our behalf, *O God whose son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name and follow where he leads.* In the chanting of the 23rd Psalm which begins the Lord is my shepherd I have all I need, we cannot help but recall the moments when saying those words has brought solace and comfort to countless numbers of us. In the Gospel we heard proclaimed Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd and that he lays down his life for the sheep. It is a day known throughout the church as Good Shepherd Sunday. A day in the season of Easter when we think about Jesus as the good shepherd willing to risk all and give all, even his very life, for the sheep in his care. At the offertory, our choir will sing a William Blake poem, *The Lamb*, set to music. So we have sheep, sheep, everywhere sheep. The shepherd in our prayers, the sheep in Holy Scripture and the lamb in our music. William Blake's poem called *The Lamb* is one attempt, one lens for a view of God this day. Blake sought, in a series of poems to understand how it is that the same God made both the gentle, lovely lamb and the fierce, bold tiger and the fly. And his poetry was one way that this rebellious, talented, man searched for the answers to life's most compelling and complicated questions. Little lamb who made thee? Dost thou know who made thee? He is called by thy name for he calls himself a Lamb, He is meek and he is mild, He became a little child.

Even the style of this poem is formatted to ask all the questions in the 1<sup>st</sup> verse and to offer all the answers in the second. I, a child and thou a lamb, we are called by his name. Simple, clear, childlike but not childish. All of the questions get answers. There is no doubt, no uncertainty, no lack of understanding of our relationship to God in Blake's poem.

But that is a poem and this is life. But here we are, I think, in the season of Easter still, and maybe always, trying to make sense of a Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. To make sense of Jesus who did that for us. On Easter Day, when we were freshly scrubbed and exuberant, perhaps because we were coming off 40 days without candy or wine or swearing it all makes sense. But this is just another Sunday in the few we get each year and Easter already seems like a long time ago.

What are we to make of the Good Shepherd? First we might consider that the name good shepherd is not unlike the name Good Samaritan, that places together two unlikely pieces. Shepherds, like Samaritans to their rivals, would not have been considered good by any stretch of the imagination. One might well liken it to saying today, good terrorist, the good thief. In any event, the name alone is a reminder that in the life of faith, nothing can be taken for granted and that this person Jesus is setting out to do nothing less than turn the world on its side. In Jesus' day, and in a very stratified culture, shepherds were on the lowest rung of any social ladder. They had no land of their own and were hired to watch over the wealth and property of others. To do so required them to leave their own families and homes unprotected while they went about their task. Thus the work of shepherds had no value or honor. It is to this understanding that Jesus says I am the good shepherd

To be truthful, I suppose I find the image of the Good Shepherd both quaint and bit mysterious. It is comforting, in that conjuring up images of a movie-star like Jesus with the lamb gently draped about his shoulders reminds me of the church school of my youth and all the love and security I knew there. But at the very same time, it is mysterious. I have no first hand knowledge of sheep or flocks, or shepherds or wolves. In fact, the only piece of the whole gospel text I have any personal experience with is being the hired hand. Starting with my very first babysitting job right through to today, I know what it is like to be responsible for a time for something or someone that is not your own. And I bet you do too. I bet you know the weight of responsibility that comes with being the hired hand and the relief when the parents return, or the clock strikes 5, and you can leave behind your work. Our lives are filled with hired hands who do tasks, big and small and who care for people and things in their watch. In fact, if you have been a parent, or loved another person, or held a job, you probably know more about being the hired hand than you do about the sheep or about Jesus the Good Shepherd.

In many ways, we are all like the hired hand in almost every aspect of our life. Responsible for a time, for our time, for the time entrusted to our care.

Whether it is our job, our children, our aging parents, the organizations and causes and institutions we care about we are only responsible for a time and, despite our very best efforts, we are never really in charge. Jobs change, children grow up, parents die, and institutions find new direction. Perhaps, like the hired hand, we will run away when we are scared, perhaps we stay, but no person, place or thing every really belongs to us anyway. We are simply the one to whom it was entrusted for a moment in time.

The temporary nature of our care does not let us off the hook from doing our part but it might serve to remind us that all of our fretting is for naught. In these last 15 months, as we at Trinity Church find ourselves between Rectors, I have heard the words, "so who is in charge?" bantered about both within our parish and outside the walls. Some are worried that it seems no one is in charge, some do not care. Some feel we do not have enough people in charge, some think we have too many. Some do not like what the people in charge are doing and some do not like that some do not like what the people in charge are doing. But here is the bottom line. We are all, you and I, simply put the hired hands for the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is in charge and we are each of us, simply the hired hands. Here to do our part, faithfully, for our time. And then we too will leave.

So I still do not know too much about sheep and wolves and hired hands. And maybe we all are more like the dog Marley in obedience school, not feeling ready for this and with some growing up to do. But I do know this. The Good Shepherd knows us by name and loves us. We are each of us, called by his name. We are in the Good Shepherd's good hands today and always. And thanks be to God, in this obedience school of faith there is no getting kicked out of class.

Amen.