

Well, good morning and happy Mother's Day to those to whom it applies, to our mothers and those who have mothered us throughout our lives. We give thanks for you.

Well, no one wants to be called a sheep. It's bad form. We think of sheep as smelly and dirty, stupid and helpless, particularly compared to goats. Goats flock together when they're in danger but they are much more independent and self sufficient. When we talk about herd mentality, sheep are the icon of mindless going along, but Jesus continually talks about loving the sheep and last week we heard him tell Peter three times to do that. Sheep need a shepherd and Jesus claims and fills that role.

Jesus also became the sacrificial lamb and that is clearly a mindful act on his part. John's vision in Revelation notes that the saints, Jesus' followers, have been washed in the blood of the lamb and that the lamb has become their shepherd. The saints have a share in his life giving blood offering and they become one flock.

Jesus's followers are meant to imitate his mindful and intentional care for the whole flock. We use slightly different imagery for baptism and confirmation, but the transformation is exactly the same. Baptism names us as part of the flock. We are branded as Christ's own forever and confirmation is our public declaration that we will be both sheep and shepherd.

We started this morning with a story about Tabitha, or Dorcas. Her name means gazelle, a herd animal, and it also means graceful, both in Aramaic and in Greek. Here is a grace filled sheep who spent her life caring for others by quite literally clothing them with dignity. She dies, her companions call for Peter in their grief, and when he gets there he sends them out of the room and prays and he uses almost exactly the same words that Jesus did when he raised a little girl from her bed saying, "Little girl, get up." Peter was there when Jesus raised that girl and now he's become a shepherd and he's calling another sheep and shepherd, Tabitha, to get up, to rise.

That story ends with what seems like a throwaway line. It says that Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner. Tanning sheepskins and goat hides was an unclean occupation for Jews and there's plenty of reason why. Tanning involves dead animals. It smells a lot worse than the animals do either dead or alive and dung and urine were often used to treat the skins. Tanners were rarely, if ever, fully clean. Peter's choice of Simon's house is a public witness. All God's sheep are worthy of love and care.

As some congregations signs say, "All are welcome. No exceptions." Like Jesus, Peter stays and eats with a social outcast. The banquet table is spread in the presence of enemies and rejection. The cup overflows and goodness and mercy abide with Simon. The controversy that Jesus engages in the temple in this morning's Gospel shows the struggle that's going on in first century Judaism. It was a lot like what people experienced during the Protestant reformation or what's going on today in the Islamic world.

Which strand of the tradition is going to prevail? Which party can claim the heart and the central truths of a particular religious tradition. Jesus was a reformer, calling the Jewish people back to the heart of their prophetic tradition, seeking to love God and to love neighbor as self. He modeled and he taught what the Prophet Micah said were essential. Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.

Out of that first century struggle came both rabbinic Judaism and what came to be called Christianity. There's a reference to that struggle, to that reality of struggle, a little earlier in the book of Acts when some of the apostles have been teaching and speaking about Jesus as the Messiah and they're hauled into court. Their boldness has prompted all the onlookers to cry for their death, but one of Saul's teachers, Saul later becomes the Apostle Paul, one of his teachers, Gamaliel, is among the judges or the counselors there and he reminds his colleagues about other popular leaders whose movements have rapidly evaporated.

Rabbi Gamaliel offers these sage and holy words. He says, "If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. In that case, you may even be found to be fighting against God." He's saying to them, don't assume you know the mind of God and don't be deathly anxious because something unexpected seems to be rising.

You can hear the rivalry in today's gospel when Jesus says, "I've told you, but you don't believe and you're not my sheep. My sheep hear my voice and follow me." John's Gospel was the last one to be written and it probably wasn't in its final form until about the year 100, two or three generations after Jesus' crucifixion.

By the beginning of the second century, Jesus' followers had been thrown out of the synagogues. They were a clearly different group. Families and communities were being divided according to how they worshiped. The shooting in Poway has some of its roots in that division and at times in its history the church has encouraged that division, particularly when it has imitated empire rather than the Kingdom of God.

There's another strand in John's Gospel, one about the good shepherd. Jesus says, "I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice, so there will be one flock and one shepherd." At times in our history that's been heard as an order to go and drag sheep of another stripe into the fold, but that's not Jesus's way of loving. He'll go and hang out with them, but he doesn't muscle them into a different pasture. The muscle Jesus uses most often is his heart.

The next strongest are probably his leg muscles, walking all over the countryside for he has no permanent home and he goes where the spirit leads. He does a lot of hill climbing up to Jerusalem and then down to Galilee or to the ocean and he goes up and down mountains to pray. He also seems to spend a lot of time standing around talking and teaching or waiting for his disciples to

get their act together. His physical work is that of a sheep and shepherd, wandering the countryside, looking for lush grazing and clear water, the stuff of life.

15 years ago my husband and I backpacked across the Ruby mountains in Nevada. It's about a 40 mile trail and it takes several days. We kept seeing things carved into the trunks of aspen trees. For more than a century shepherds have been taking their flocks up there in the summertime to graze. We saw the same message over and over and over again for at least 20 miles. Antonio Hidalgo, Peruvian shepherd with plenty of guts but no money.

Senor Hidalgo clearly did a lot of standing around waiting for his sheep to fill their bellies. That willingness to use heart and leg muscle, compassion and accompaniment, is key to following the lamb as sheep and shepherd. We're asked to have the same kind of patience and mercy for those who walk in Godly ways not quite our own.

John's Gospel is a profoundly intertwined mix of easy and hard, clear and opaque, and it includes another wonderful verse where Jesus says, "I still have things to say to you but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth." Rabbi Goldstein of congregation Chabad in Poway showed the world what that looks like as his bandaged and fingerless hand kept pointing to that godly way of compassion and patience.

The spirit of truth continues to remind us that we are all brothers and sisters, that Rabbi Goldstein and Rabbi Gamaliel are Jesus's brothers and so are all who seek the way of love. Love the sheep, have mercy on them all, and be patient with the slow ones or the ones who wander off. They're all our brothers and sisters. The good shepherd cares for every single one of them. Listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. Help others hear it and hear it crying "Love one another. Tend the whole flock for every single sheep has a home in God's pasture."