

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
April 29, 2012
Good Shepherd Sunday
John 10:11-18

“Good Shepherd, Good Sheep”

*Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.
Fill the hearts of your faithful,
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.*

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. And it is a powerful and emotional day for me because it is a special anniversary—the anniversary of my first coming to the Haydenville Congregational Church. Seven years ago on Good Shepherd Sunday I drove to this church, stood at this pulpit, and preached for the first time. I stood here, and I preached to 15 people right there, hoping very much that those 15 people would choose me as their next Pastor. I was a candidate and I wanted to be called to serve this Church.

The Sanctuary was very different then—so was this pulpit. The pulpit, built for tall, male pastors, was actually 2 inches higher then and there was no step. Now of course I have this wonderful step that Ellie Loomis made for me. But back in the day, the pulpit was high and the floor was low...I stood on my tip-toes so I could see those 15 people in the front 2 pews. There were literally 15 people.

And the ceiling, O my Lord, the ceiling. The paint on the ceiling was chipping, flaking, peeling and dropping on the heads of the 15. The parishioners called it “snowing” and it was “snowing” the whole time I preached.

But small congregation, the tall pulpit, and the peeling paint were not foremost on my mind on that Good Shepherd Sunday seven years ago when I stood right here for the first time. Weighing heavily on my mind was the sermon I had written to deliver on that important Sunday.

I did not know the 15 parishioners who called this place their Church home but I knew that I wanted to be called to this Hilltown Church.

When invited to preach at this Church as a candidate for the job of pastor, I thought long and hard about what kind of sermon I might deliver. What, I wondered, would impress them and make them want to hear more and choose me as their pastor? What would wow them? I wondered, as I sat down to write my sermon for Good Shepherd, what would dazzle them?

But slowly, as I prepared for my visit to the Haydenville Congregational Church, I realized of course that it was less important to wow the parishioners than to preach a faithful and thoughtful sermon and to show them who I am. I realized of course that my job was not to dazzle them, my job was to preach in my authentic voice on the text for the day so they could make an informed decision about whether I was the right fit for their Church.

And so I took the Good Shepherd text from the Book of John, the very passage you heard read today, and I prayed on it. I decided that I was called to be real, to be who I am, to tell the truth as I knew it...to explain and unpack the text as best as I was able, through the filter of all my study, all of my experiences, all that I brought to each sermon I wrote. But I also knew that what I felt called to say about the Good Shepherd passage would be taking a big risk. I knew if I preached what was for me a truthful and authentic sermon on the Good Shepherd reading that this little congregation might not like me, might not choose me when I was done. But preaching on the text as I understood it really was the only faithful and truthful choice.

And so I stepped into the tall pulpit on Good Shepherd Sunday seven years ago and I said that Good Shepherd Sunday was a sweet and comforting tradition in our faith. I said that Good Shepherd Sunday was recognized throughout the world, and it should be. I said that Jesus certainly was a Good Shepherd. BUT I said trying to hide my nervousness and trepidation...I would be happier if maybe Good Shepherd Sunday in the spring was paired with Jesus the Radical Revolutionary in the Fall.

I preached a real sermon, with a real edge, as I believe pastors are really called to do. I said that if we reduce Jesus to simply the Good Shepherd image—loving, soft, comforting, and protective—we lose the radical Jesus who challenged the status quo, stood up to the Roman Empire, defied purity laws, loved outcasts, and questioned the accepted social, political and religious norms of his time.

I stood at the too-tall pulpit, on my tip-toes as my legs began to shake from nervousness and fatigue, and I said we should embrace Jesus as the Good

Shepherd—for sure. But Jesus the Good Shepherd does not tell the whole story. Jesus was not just a Good Shepherd. In a voice that grew more warbley and breathy as I went on, I said that we must always remember that Jesus was executed by the Roman Empire...and it was NOT because he was a Good Shepherd. It was because he was a radical...he led a movement...he turned the status quo on its head talking about economic justice and lasting peace in the face of a wealthy imperial system of domination dependent on a huge and powerful military.

I got kind of squeaky and pleading...I talked about the Jesus I know and love...the Good Shepherd Revolutionary. I did talk about how Jesus loves us and comfort us in our times of desperation and need. But I also said that Jesus spoke endlessly about ushering in the kingdom of God...and it was not some misty dreamy far-off place, he talked about creating the kingdom of God here on earth. And not someday far away in the distant future but NOW based on what WE DO and how WE act. I talked about how Jesus in the face of an oppressive, fear-based, violence-loving imperial power talked about creating the kingdom of God here, on earth, now. I talked about how Jesus' entire ministry was focused on economic justice and the presence of peace. I talked about Jesus as a fierce, brave and faithful nonviolent warrior—I referred to him as a bold warrior for justice.

I said that if Jesus had engaged simply in acts of charity, he would have been canonized. But because he spoke powerfully about economic justice and the principles of peace, he was crucified.

When finished preaching, I sat down and exhaled fully for the first time that day. The 15 parishioners did not have Sermon Response Time back then, and they only had Coffee Hour once a month. But they did have Coffee Hour that day and so while I sat in the Dining Room and drank coffee and ate their banana bread, I heard their reactions responses to my sermon.

Cora sat with me, looked me in the eye and said, "Thank you dear, that was important." Diane felt like my sermon reflected her theology and politics. Trish said she was an aging hippie and it was the radical Jesus that she knew and loved. Norma hugged me and simply said, "I think we need you." And when I asked Ellie, who seemed to be very busy in the kitchen (and I worried that she was avoiding me) how the sermon felt for her, she told me that it gave her a lot to think about and that was always good. And then she smiled her broad Ellie smile and said, "Welcome." Who knew that this little Hilltown Church was filled with closet radicals? Who knew?

People think I came to the quiet, sleepy Haydenville Congregational Church and radicalized the congregation—it's not true. This place was a hotbed of progressive values before I got her. A small hot bed to be sure. But a hot bed just the same. This crew knew long before I preached that fateful Jesus-the-Good-Shepherd-Revolutionary sermon that Jesus cannot be reduced to just one thing, one description, one image in a stained glass window. Jesus was multi-layered, complicated and complex. He was sensitive, caring and cried over Jerusalem. He was also a savvy community organizer, a movement builder, a fiery preacher, a charismatic leader, and a courageous visionary who believed that we can create the kingdom of God here on earth, now! Jesus, as this small band of believers here in Haydenville knew, cannot be reduced to simply the Good Shepherd. He was that, and so much more!

Jesus was in his time a combination of Mother Theresa, Che Guevara, Gandhi, Oscar Romero and Bruce Springsteen...not the singing part but the social commentary part. And this gang of 15 here in Haydenville, which to my sorrow soon dropped to 13 (but that is another sermon), knew that there were many layers and sides to our beloved savior and they did not want me to dumb them down, be patronizing or simplify the story.

In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus saying "I am the Good Shepherd." But I want you to understand the true meaning of the word that is used there for "good." The word, in the original Greek, is *kalos*. Now the Greek word *kalos* is often translated as "good" meaning the opposite of "bad." And while that is not inaccurate, *kalos* has a subtly different meaning that goes beyond just good as the opposite of bad. *Kalos* is more accurately translated as "good" in the sense of a model. Jesus is not just a Good Shepherd, he is the model shepherd. In John 10 verse 11, Jesus states that the model shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. In verse 14, Jesus tells his followers that the model shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. *Kalos* shepherding means protecting at any cost the flock known to the shepherd. At the end of the passage, we hear that Jesus, the *kalos* shepherd knows the cost of protection and is willing to pay that cost.

Our beloved Jesus was the *kalos* Shepherd. And was also the *kalos* radical, the model radical, the *kalos* revolutionary...he lived what he preached. He did not just talk about equality and loving those on the margins of power, he touched sick people and those filled with demons and he healed them. He did not just talk about economic injustice, he loved and traveled with poor people, he was a peasant himself and preached to and organized the peasant class, he showed them their value. He surrounded himself with the 99%. Jesus was the *kalos* radical.

He was not shrill or aggressive...he was consistent, even, bravely responding when taunted and challenged, always preaching a message of inclusion, fairness, justice and peace.

Jesus was the Good Shepherd and the Good Radical...in the sense of *kalos*, the model.

Seven years ago I came here. And I stood on my tip-toes and looked out on the 15 people in those front pews. And soon after that Jesus the Good-Shepherd-Revolutionary sermon, they chose me as their pastor. And as I got to know them, I realized that they were Good Sheep in the sense of *kalos*, the model. They were in many ways a small, model congregation...even though the congregation had grown smaller and smaller over the years, the core 15 did not give up, they did not stop meeting, they did not stop praying, singing and doing good work in the world. Even when the 15 people were the congregation, AND the Deacons, AND the Trustees, AND the Church Council, they met, made decisions, kept the doors open, visited sick people, baked bread for poor people, and supported a Palestinian orphan with their dollars. They were Good Sheep, in the sense of *kalos*—a model.

Mother Theresa said, “We are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful” and faithful they were. They were in some ways a model church. Sure they did not have many people, a big budget, or a fancy building. But they never stopped gathering for worship even on the Sundays when they could all fit in the Choir loft and they sat there together. They never stopped lighting candles, singing hymns and praying together. When it became too costly to heat the Sanctuary, they moved into the Dining Room for Sunday worship and they kept meeting. The faithful 15 never stopped believing in the resurrection—of their beloved Jesus and the possibility of resurrection of their beloved Church.

Jesus was the Good Shepherd, the *kalos* Shepherd, the model Shepherd. AND he was the Good Radical, the *kalos* Radical, the model revolutionary. And this Church with its small, feisty congregation was a *kalos* church, a model church. Although the congregation was small in number, the souls that were here carried on, stayed true to their faith, met for worship, and supported each other. They were Good Sheep. Model Sheep. They were a flock that did not give up, did not give in, did not disperse, did not dissolve.

Good Shepherd. Good Radicals. Good Sheep.
Amen.