

## Sermon: Good Shepherd – Gethsemane

I am happy to be here, and thankful for the opportunity of bringing the Word of God in a very special day for all of you, as you install Pr. John Nelson, as your senior pastor. I want to share with you that since my husband Patrick and I heard about Gethsemane from Bishop Craig Johnson, we were interested in knowing more about you, your ministry and the possibility of your partnership with St. Paul's and its new Latino ministry. When we first came in contact with church leaders and pastors of Gethsemane we seemed to share the conviction that something good was in store for this partnership. We had no plans, just the intention of being open to opportunities to share our lives and ministries, trusting that new blessing were about to come for both churches. We at St. Paul's have been blessed by your friendship. I trust that it is also true for you. In December a group of great artists from Gethsemane joined us in making stars and attending our big Christmas celebration. We had a fun time together, and we started to know and like each other. Last Thursday, we enjoyed very much your wonderful concert and exhibit of the ministries that you offer. That day I thought that new sprouts are emerging in this relationship.

As a Latin American woman with 20 years of ministry in this country, I am convinced that we are incomplete without each other's revelations, and we need each other if we want to hear God's voice and not just our own.

The early Christian church, as shown in our Acts lesson, speaks loudly about the kind of relationships that a Christian community can reach in their attempt to grow toward God's intention for us. Acts says, "All who believed were together and had all things in common." I can't imagine more togetherness than that! And to that great togetherness, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved! It is easy to believe why people would like to join to that kind of church. It seems that kind of community is inconceivable in the very individualistic world in which we live today. Unlike other areas of ministry we don't set goals for intentionally cultivating togetherness in our communities of faith, but we assume that relationships are given. And yet unity in Christ we proclaim every time we take communion is challenged by the divisions in our world. If that more radical and creative forms of being community found in the book of Acts is part of *our* challenge to be faithful to God's love, what can we do to grow in togetherness in words and deed?

In our gospel Jesus refers to a shepherd and to sheep that recognize and follow the voice of the shepherd. It is interesting, that although most of us know little or nothing about shepherds and sheep, the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is very familiar to us. Years ago I asked my father, who as a child had a little flock, to tell me about his relationship with the sheep. I don't remember much of what he said, but I do remember his face softening while he remembered with tenderness his sheep. He talked about them like a 60 year old father who had a clear memory of his child as a little baby. That was my first knowledge about sheep; obviously for my father it involved love, sharing time, careful observation and self denial.

Recently I have looked for more information about sheep. For example, I learned that their tendency to follow each other is a sign of their ability to cope while being vulnerable in an aggressive environment. The way they protect themselves is to come together pretending to be a large body able to scare their predators. One of their more

remarkable qualities is their sociability. Sheep know their shepherd and remember a big number of other sheep for a long time.

Listening to their shepherd seems to be easier for sheep, than for us to listen to Jesus. What makes it difficult for us is not just that most often we don't quite have to truly listen, but the fact that we don't trust the shepherd and the other sheep. In our minds tainted by sin we continue to fear, mistrust and rebel from God. A sign that we are not listening Jesus is the distance and even animosity between Christian people and denominations. Jesus has a unifying voice; his enemy instead is the one who divides.

What would happen if we truly listened to God and to each other? Speaking of my own experience I can say listening to God is scary. I confess that after running away from poverty and insecurity most of my life I have come to create a safe, stable style of life. Listening to Jesus opens my ears to listen to your voices and the voices of my community, and that makes me vulnerable. Called by God to listen to Jesus through the little flock at St. Paul's and often to their impossible challenges, the fragile safety that I have cultivated with my own hands becomes very shaky.

Fear to let go of what is mine is in the way of listening to God and to others. Fear that God is going to ask more and more from me keeps me from trusting. And the truth is that God *will* ask more and more from me, in fact God is going to ask for all of all! That is not because God wants me poor and fearful as I once was, but because God wants to give me life, and life in abundance. Whatever castle I have constructed to save myself is built on sand, not rock, and it is meant to fall.

True listening to the Good Shepherd requires maturity and a sacrificial disposition to deny ourselves and put the other before us. It is a difficult art that takes patience, determination and discipline, and, most important of all, a holy encounter that allows us to enter the depth of people's lives, and our own places of darkness and sorrow.

There are many ways to listen to God; a sermon, other people, an experience of life, etc., but the result is always the same. Listening to God softens our hearts and makes us vulnerable. That's why to love God and to love each other as Jesus loves us is a commandment, not a voluntary option.

There is a divine contradiction in our faith: when we allow ourselves to listen to God and others, especially when they appear to have nothing to give back, we become richer and better. I know that, I had taste it. When I look back to all the people I have met and served in Mexico, South Bronx, Philadelphia's Latino neighborhood, and my neighbors in Phillips today, I can say that my life is much richer and fulfilled because of them. Knowing the women who come every Tuesday and Thursday to be together and to learn English made proud and humble. Their generosity, their courage in terrible circumstances, their faithfulness is a powerful lesson for me.

I don't remember exactly how I came to know Eric some two years ago. He was always silent and angry. He was not the person I would look for. In fact soon after I met him, his wife came asking for help because he was involved in a fight and taken to jail. That was the beginning of listening to Eric, not because he spoke much more than before, but because I entered into a deeper compartment of his life and I couldn't stop myself of loving and suffering with him. With time I came to learn that the scars that Eric has on his head were the result of being abused as a child. I learned also that the fight he was caught in was his attempt to defend his younger brother, the same brother he defended from their abusive father since they were little kids. When Eric became a person for me,

I became a person for him too. Few people give me more certainty of their love and loyalty than Eric. I know that if I am in need he will fight for me even if that means to lose a few more teeth in his mouth. I believe that is community.

Celebrating with Jenny the little victory of getting job for even two days a week makes me see life in a new perspective. Going to Mexico to visit a dying grandmother who begs to see her son who can not go, feels like walking near a cliff, but I know that in that visit God's presence will be even more evident.

Jesus says "I am the gate for the sheep". Unfortunately we don't always use the gate to enter for green pasture, as the Psalm says.

In the Bronx they were building a new apartment complex on a huge empty lot where other apartments had burned down. For months on this empty lot there was a pretentious locked gate, but curiously, there was no fence attached to it. Just a big gate with a lock, in the middle of nothing! It looked surrealistic and ridiculous. Sometimes without us knowing it, our churches present a similar picture. If we restrict the entrance to the grace of God, while allowing thieves of indifference, self-righteousness or materialism to take over, we are like that empty lot with a big gate that I saw in the Bronx.

Sometimes our churches have big and thick walls, and a small and insignificant door, so that people outside have no idea what is inside. We are so jealous of keeping ourselves sanitized from the exterior that we block our doors with suspicion and fear of those who are different. It was hard for some members of St. Paul's to accept that some neighbors on our street told Patrick and me that they thought that our church was closed. Sometimes the cost of keeping ourselves in comfortable spots makes us lose perspective and a sense of mission. Taking risks is part of being alive, especially alive by the fire of the Spirit.

There are churches like Transfiguration in the Bronx, where I served when I just moved to the US. The church was and still is located in one of the poorest areas of the city. It had a metal door that was painted by young people with bright Gospel stories, showing the sings of hope and life that they had found in that modest church. One morning I came to the church and the door was bent because robbers had attempted to rip it away by pulling it with a truck. That old painted door never gave up. It was broken and we had to fix it, but until the end, the gate was faithful to its mission of protecting the church from robbers. You can learn a little more about that church thanks to a beautiful book called "Breathing Space" by Pr. Heidi Neumark.

Thank God Jesus is our shepherd and our gate, as the gospel says. And these two are not in contradiction. According to an investigation about the way shepherds took care of their flock in old times in the Middle East, at night the shepherds surrounded the sheep with branches that caused noise when being touched by intruders. The shepherd left a little space—an open door—in the improvised entrance. That's where the shepherd slept, so that the wolf had to go through his own body to get to the sheep. In that sense the shepherd became the gate of the sheepfold.

Jesus is our Shepherd, the One that we recognize and follow his voice, and he takes us to green pastures even today. He is the gate, the One who laid down his life for our sake. Because He loves us so much and so we love him we are attentive to his voice and ready to answer: Yes, Lord!

Not included:

The relationship between Gethsemane and St. Paul has a personal touch for me. Going back to 1987, while working with AMEXTRA (Mexican Association for Rural and Urban Transformation) in Mexico and serving communities in need, I met Pr. Keith Olstad and his famous sense of humor. Later we had the opportunity to work together in a ministry of the LCA called "Mission Discovery". Pr. Olstad kept pushing me from the back seat to the front when I felt like a fish out of water because of my little understanding of English. When my family and I moved to Minneapolis 2.5 years ago, we found Keith and with him Gethsemane. Now I understand that what moved Keith to push me to the front was the shared conviction that superficial differences like race, education, social status, and even lack of English, which often set people apart and even in antagonistic corners, are really nutritious food for a better understanding of God and God's mission in the world.