

“A Shepherd’s Gnarled Hands”

The Rev. Charlotte Frantz

April 25, 2010

Texts: Psalm 23, John 10:22-30 and Acts 9:36-42

In the nursery room in the first church I served, there hung an almost life size painting of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Jesus has flowing brown, shoulder-length hair. He is dressed in a white robe and purple tunic. The sheep are gathered around him. It was a portrait of a neat, clean Jesus out for a stroll among the sheep.

What a contrast to Delmar, a shepherd whose family belonged to the second congregation I served. Delmar’s face was well weathered by the eastern Montana sun and wind. There were deep creases around his twinkling blue eyes. He came to church only for weddings, funerals and baptisms. His wife was the church organist, so I frequently stopped by the house with Sunday’s bulletin in hand.

Delmar’s bibbed overalls and cowboy boots always smelled like the barn. There were dark stains on them that never washed out. Bits of straw stuck in Delmar’s hair and during lambing season he was likely to have a coke bottle or two stuck in the big pickets of his overalls.

Delmar’s life revolved around his sheep. He counted the year from lambing season onward. He never stayed away from home overnight because he needed to get back to shutter in the sheep. He knew every ewe’s likes and dislikes and noticed even the smallest irregularity in any of the lamb’s behaviors.

Delmar wasn’t as tall as I, but he was strong and wiry. When I’d stop by the barn on my way out of the house, he’d sometimes invite me to sit with him on a bale of straw. He didn’t talk much, so a visit consisted mostly of sitting there with him, watching his sheep.

One afternoon Delmar asked if I’d like to feed some of the new lambs. He filled one of the coke bottles with milk, fitted it with a feeding nipple, and handed it to me. He watched as I tilted up the head of a newborn lamb and stroked her throat until she grabbed on and began to suck. “Not bad for a preacher,” he said.

Meantime, he filled four more bottles and placed them between his fingers—balancing them just so, all in one hand—and fed four of the lambs that had been frisking around the sheep pen.

Delmar’s hands intrigued me. They were large, out of proportion to the rest of his body. They were rough and gnarled with age, arthritis and scars. Barbed wires, thorn bushes, thrashing ewes, and power machinery had all left their marks on those hands. The forefinger of his right hand had been cut off at the knuckle.

Every year on this fourth Sunday after Easter, the designated Gospel reading is from the 10th chapter of John. Each year we read some portion of this chapter in which Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd. And we read that well loved Psalm, Psalm 23. Initially, the image which comes to my mind is that huge portrait on the wall of the nursery in Sellersburg, Indiana. But that image seems inadequate, and I think of Delmar, sitting on a bale of straw, in the sheep corral next to his home in Savage, Montana.

I thought particularly of Delmar's hands as I read the verse: "And no one will snatch them out of my hand." You and I are held in the shepherd's hand. Not a clean hand, not a well manicured hand, but a gnarled, scarred hand, a hand that may well have resembled Delmar's loving hands.

The gnarled, scarred hands of our shepherd are hands that provide life's basic necessities: food, water, and safety. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters."

The psalmist understood that everything we absolutely need in life is already provided—the food on our tables, the water that we drink, places of refuge and safety. What a counter-cultural song of praise!

We live in a culture that teaches us to want more and more. Obesity has become a national problem in the United States and at least a part of the issue is that, as a people, we have lost the ability to know when our hunger is satisfied. But the problem is more than a problem related to our eating habits. Our consumer culture is a culture that creates need. Last year's model of almost anything is not quite satisfying. Our appetites for things as well as for food, are more and more difficult to satisfy.

Our faith tradition warns against such growing insatiability. Jesus reminded us of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field and warned us against worrying so much about life's basic needs.

I watched Delmar mixing up formula for the bum lambs whose mothers did not claim them. I watched him dump the pans of old water and put out fresh. I watched him open the corral pen gate and walk out into an open meadow where his ewes could graze. Day in, day out, 365 days of the year, all the days of his life since he was 16, Delmar provided for his sheep.

Jesus said, "No one will snatch them out of my hand." We are held in the hand of a shepherd who provides us with all that we really need.

"He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Yeah, though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil."

How many times, I wondered, had Delmar brought his sheep back from the edge of death?

Sheep are notoriously unable to care for themselves. During calving season, the ranchers in my congregation set their alarms to go off every 2-3 hours in the night. They'd get out of bed, get in the pickup, and drive across the pastures, looking for cows that were down calving. Once in a while they'd find one in trouble.

It was a different story among the shepherders. As ewes approach their due dates, they are brought into the corral. Some one has to stay awake all night, ready to pull lambs about to enter the world. Generally, teenagers took the night shift. Delmar's grandchildren bunked out in the barn, built a fire to keep themselves warm, and waited. Older teens could handle a normal birth, but every year there were a few ewes for which a younger teen was sent to wake Delmar. Those gnarled, arthritic hands had lovingly brought lambs to life and restored ewes to the flock.

There were scratches on those hands and a scar from a place infection had taken hold after Delmar rescued sheep caught in the fencing. A blizzard had come down on us with little warning. Sheep will cuddle up against each other against the cold and wind, and they will cuddle so closely they trample or smother the ones on the bottom of the heap.

I saw Delmar bundled up against the driving wind and subzero cold, pulling, tugging, slapping sheep to get them moved away from the fence line and into the corral. Those gnarled, scarred and wounded hands would not give up the effort to rescue the sheep at the bottom of the heap, the ones whose life was endangered by the flock's panicked effort to survive the cold winds.

Now, these many years later, as I think of Delmar, I think also of Jesus, who in his own way, pushed and shoved against those at the top of the heap in order to reach down and rescue the people who were in danger of being crushed—widows, the incapacitated, lepers, beggars, those whose behavior no one understood and so they were said to be inhabited by evil spirits.

Jesus said, "No one will snatch them out of my hand." You and I are held in the hands of a shepherd who rescues us again and again from the possibility of death.

"You are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

Images of blessing. This shepherd of whom the Psalmist sings does more than provide the minimum for his flock. This shepherd blesses in abundance. Even when enemies are camped round about, this shepherd prepares a table, a big, full course meal. The wine flows freely. He (or she) bring out a large cruet of oil, to be used for anointing and healing and blessing. Nothing is withheld or measured out in small quantities. God, the shepherd who holds us in his wounded, scarred hands, blesses us with overwhelming and uncalled for generosity.

I think of Delmar, sitting on his bale of straw or maybe the old plastic porch chairs no longer suitable for use on the deck behind the house. A ewe comes up and nuzzles him—he reaches out and scratches her back. He sighs contentedly. I think there is no place he would rather be than here in this barn, caring for these sheep. He gives them everything they need—and more. Most of all, he gives them his presence. He's not shepherding on the side like some of his neighbors. He's not tending fields and fields of beets like others in the valley. He grows alfalfa for feed and gets his income as a water monitor for the canal that runs from his place up to Highway 2. But his preferred place to sit and contemplate life, is here in this barn, among his sheep.

Is this barn the house of the Lord? The image that comes to my mind are pictures of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem—some large, marble sanctuary with grand pillars and a great altar. I suppose that would be the house of the Lord for the clean, well manicured shepherd in the nursery room portrait.

But if my friend Delmar resembles the Good Shepherd, maybe the barn is the fitting image. Funny, Jesus was born in a barn, wasn't he? The one who identified himself as the Good Shepherd, holds us and blesses us with hands that are wounded and marked with the scars of his suffering. His house is not some far off holy place, but a place as familiar to us as the barn is to Delmar.

Good Shepherd with wounded hands holds us and will not let us go.