

Message
May 2-3, 2009 – Easter 4B
Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18
What's Our Image?

When our son Kyle was just a baby, we visited a local department store, during the winter season. Upon entering the store, we were always greeted by Snow Bear. Snow Bear's a huge, eight foot tall white fluffy creature, with bright shiny eyes, a happily painted on smile, and wears a vivid red vest. Kyle hated Snow Bear. Something about the character of snow bear just terrified him. Every time we'd drive into the parking lot of the store, Kyle would start crying even before he had a glimpse of Snow Bear. Over and over again, we'd explain that Snow Bear is a loving, gentle friend. Snow Bear would kindly kneel and extend his hand for Kyle to pet and hold. Try as we might, nothing worked to bring Kyle 'round. Finally, one day, after yet another distressing encounter with Snow Bear, we asked Snow Bear to reveal to us his true image. Happily Snow Bear bent over, and raising his big, fluffy arms, he pulled off his oversized, white, stuffed head only to reveal a very pretty, lovely looking lady. Gently, she looked at Kyle, smiled and said, "I'm a mommy, just like your mommy." Enlightened as to the truth, Kyle calmed and off we went to continue the day.

What's our image?

The image of a shepherd is not a real popular image. My guess is that most of us here don't thoroughly relate to the image of shepherd. After all, when was the last time you saw a shepherd? When I checked Craig's List last Thursday, the top jobs listed were business analyst, general manager, assistant controller, and financial advisor. The closest job opening I saw to a shepherd was environmental program manager. The job description for a shepherd is challenging. Shepherds often work alone, eat maybe but once a day, wear big, heavy cloaks to protect them from the elements and they carry a big stick, a rod to scare off whatever threatens. That may appeal to some. They spend many sleepless nights outside with their sheep because sheep tend to wander. Often a shepherd is just a guy doing a job for the money; working for the reward. Don't get me wrong the work is hard. They have to travel a lot with their jobs, getting their sheep to good pasture and water. And, sheep are gregarious and not very smart about who they hang around with. A shepherd's job can be hazardous; as sheep are defenseless and falling into the wrong hands can be perilous. Shepherds need to keep watch, day and night, looking for lost sheep. And, since shepherds live in the sheepfold with the sheep, they don't bathe often, and they smell like sheep after a day or so.

Homeless people don't have the most popular image either. Last week, as a part of "Affordable Housing Awareness Week" I was invited to participate in the simulation "Walking in Their Shoes". My name was Wendy. As Wendy I'm just recovering from a painful hospital visit. My husband is out of work, and without health insurance, I've not been able to keep up with my medical bills and pay rent. We've lost our home and are living in CARITAS. Two friends traveled with me last week. They're in a mess also. One is a single, unemployed mom with a daughter and they are both homeless. They're living in a shelter. My other friend is also homeless and lives with us, in CARITAS, with her family. So, together we spent the day on the streets trying to figure out how to

get out of our mess. We started at 7:00 a.m. at Freedom House downtown. We're thankful for the hot breakfast served by Theo, a former homeless friend, who now serves as the director of Freedom House. Just after breakfast we loaded up into a van and we were dumped out in Henrico County. Among the three of us we had a total of \$15.00 and three one way bus tickets; no cell phones or Blackberries, no cars, a sunny day, and grateful hearts for strong bodies and sturdy walking shoes.

At first we just walked, and walked, trying to figure out what to do. Eventually, after talking with others on the street, other homeless people, like ourselves, we climbed into the city bus, watched our one way tickets disappear into the turnstile and rode downtown to the Department of Social Services. There, we got in line, and we were told the wait will be about 4 hours. We were given paper work, and waited some more for a qualifications interview. After a while, we left Social Services and started walking again. We stopped to talk with a financial counselor with an organization called HOME. We learned that without a job, we're pretty limited in finding permanent shelter. And, my friend's husband has just been released from prison. No one wants to rent to an ex felon. By then it was lunch time and we were hungry.

We learned of a free meal offered at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, across from the capital. We stood in line and waited, again. My number was 202. They called us to through the lunch line in groups of 50. I sat with Stanley and Bob, and Kathy and a couple other guys whose names I never got. We all shared stories about our morning. The same story, hurry up and wait. Most of my table mates slept outside the night before. They laughed, though, commenting that you'd be crazy if you went hungry in Richmond. As they had at least this one hot meal. And, it was our second for the day. Good thing, because it was unlikely we'd find a way to get dinner. After lunch we visited the YWCA and tried to see a counselor and get a referral card. No luck, but, they were very nice and let us use the telephone and the bathroom. Then we walked to Offenders Aid and Restoration. A kind man, Calvin Weaver helped us find ways for permanent housing.

We walked some more and asked folks about apartments. Government subsidized rents are based on income. Since none of us have jobs, the 30% of our monthly income could not yet be applied. It's really hard to get a job when you don't have a permanent address. It's really hard to get a job when you may not have showered that day. It's really hard to get a job when the only clothes you have are the clothes you slept in outside under the bridge the night before.

So, we kept walking and tried to find a way to get our families into permanent shelter. Finally, after a day of seeking and searching, and exhausted, we used what was left of our cash and boarded the city bus back to Freedom House. No seats on the bus, so we stood. We were the only white people on the bus. At this point, we had become recognizable to our new homeless friends we'd met traveling throughout the day. It was a long day. I'm really glad I had my friends with me. Being homeless is a, hot, smelly, lonely, full time job.

What's our image?

I don't know about you, but sometimes I get fooled by the pictures painted for me. Or, if I were to be honest, I get fooled by the pictures I paint for others. See, last

week, while standing in line at the Social Services to qualify for food stamps, my friends and I met Darlene and Bo. Darlene and Bo have been out of work for almost a year. They know that in the City of Richmond, first you want to go to Hull Street and fill out the paper work to qualify for Welfare. This is the hardest part of getting assistance because you must have transportation. See, GRTC doesn't travel to Hull Street. So, you have to get a ride. When you get there, the wait is long. It can take all day. So, probably somebody has to drop you off and then you might have to walk back. Once you qualify for assistance, there's a 30-45 day waiting period before any help comes through. And, to maintain the qualification for help, you need to keep looking for a job. The best way to find a job is through the internet. You have to have a computer. Darlene and Bo don't have a computer, so they take the bus to the city library on Franklin Street and use what computers are available. You have to plan to return regularly to respond to any e-mail replies. After all this, Darlene and Bo want to help. They stayed with us and walked us through the process at Social Services and gave us their phone numbers and encouraged us to call them in case we had more questions about how to get assistance.

Tish, sat next to us while waiting at Social Services. Tish has been unemployed since December. Her rent is due this week. She didn't want to ask her son to help. She doesn't want him to worry. I asked her if she could count on her church to help her. "I stopped going to church...I watch church on t.v. now," she shared. "Your friends at church will be worried about you. They can help you," I said. "My church is a dressy uppy church," said Tish. She doesn't have dressy uppy clothes anymore. "If you can't get help today, how will your rent be paid," I asked? "I'm saying my prayers and I live with hope. An answer will come." As we were leaving, Tish called out, "it was nice talking with you...I hope we'll get to talk again." Somehow I just knew Tish was adding us to her prayer list.

Bob, my lunch companion at St. Paul's downtown, finally has an apartment. His addiction brought him down. He said, "I get a hot meal everyday, I have a roof over my head, I have good companionship, and today, I'm not taking a drink. So, today is a good day, and for that I'm grateful," he smiled with a toothless grin. As he was leaving to spend an empty afternoon, he turned and said, "take good care, thank you for taking the time to talk."

What's our image?

Jesus says, "there are other sheep...I must bring them...so there will be one flock..."

On June 2, Christ Church will take its very first trip to Canaan Orphanage in Haiti. Haiti, as you know, is the poorest country in the western hemisphere. Canaan started in 1991 and is home to 110 children ages 4-14. These kids have spent much of their poverty stricken years living on the streets and subsisting on dirt cookies made of dried dirt, salt and vegetable shortening. Dirt cookies obviously hold little nutritional value. But, they keep the poor and forgotten alive in Haiti. During our 7 days with Canaan, we'll paint rooms, bringing new life to the orphanage. Also, we're excited to lead a vacation bible school with the children of Canaan. Mostly, we're just there to love. We travel grateful that we've been called to share our gifts, to serve and help those

in need; to bring all into the fold. But, as is always the case, we're the ones brought into the flock; we're the ones most helped, the recipients of God's grace and mercy through those we meet and serve. Jesus has no borders; only that we come into his flock, love one another, in truth and action. We hope you are called to accompany us on this mission. Come tonight to the Haiti mission meeting, 6:30 p.m. in the worship space. Susan Bruce will lead us in preparation to be faithful sheep with these loving people.

What's our image?

This is the question I've pondered this week. How do we see ourselves? How do others picture us? Most importantly, how is it that God sees us?

Throughout John's gospel Jesus forms vivid images: pictures to help link us to who he is and who he is for us. Jesus is, the bread of life, the light of the world, the true vine, the gate, the way, the truth, the resurrection, the life. Each image is prefaced with the identifying words, "I am"; not "I'm sort of", or "I might be like", but the sure and certain, "I am", the sacred, holy, saving, "I am", Jesus, God made known. Jesus is our trusting, loving, Good Shepherd, who gently leads, gathering us into his fold with pastures of saving grace, abundantly, flowing, living waters of life that renew and restore. He echoes the very words spoken to Moses by the divine presence when the shepherd Moses, caring for his flock at the mountain of Horeb, receives God's saving message in the burning bush. "I am", is the first person singular of the Hebrew, "to be", YHWH; the God who is, the God of the ancestors, God of the fathers, the God that causes, creates, the God who equips and empowers; the God who will be, always.

And, Jesus is not just a shepherd. He's the *Good* Shepherd. Good shepherds are more than getting the job done. A good shepherd is dedicated and loyal. He knows his sheep. They are his most precious, intimate friends. In fact, as he draws us into the fold, he calls by name, one by one, to be his companions. A good shepherd is faithful, patient, kind, and courteous. A Good Shepherd risks everything for his friends. The Good Shepherd is gracious. Our Good Shepherd, is love. There are false shepherds in our midst as well. We can be tricked by false shepherds. They have the image of Good Shepherd. But, false shepherds don't love us the way the Good Shepherd loves us. False shepherds, don't have the strength to protect us from harm, aren't concerned about whether or not we're gathered in a loving relationship. Our Good Shepherd, the one who loves us so deeply, has looked deep within us only to see genuine truth and love, even though his flock may well look different on the outside. In Jesus' vision, his image of us, is one united body, with all our differences. He calls us to bold obedience. He is the God who has laid down his life for us, restores our soul, leads us on right paths, and walks with us in the darkest of valleys, only to anoint us with comfort, goodness and mercy. We listen for his voice. He knows us as his. We are his children. He calls us to him, to abide in his love; a love that is not just words or talk; but a love that images genuine action.

What's our image? Surrender to the Good Shepherd. Look in the mirror. Uncover the truth. Trust and be transformed in his love; now look again. What image are we called to reveal?

