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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

Enfolded by Love

*A Sermon by*

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: John 10:11-18

May 3, 2009

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🎵 God is still speaking,

An old man told his doctor, "I don't think my wife's hearing is as good as it used to be. What should I do?"

The doctor replied, "Try this test first. When your wife is at the sink doing dishes, stand fifteen feet behind her and ask her a question. If she doesn't respond, keep moving closer, asking the question until she hears you."

He went home and saw his wife preparing dinner. Standing fifteen feet behind her he said, "What's for dinner, honey?" Hearing no reply, he moved up to ten feet behind her and repeated the question. Still no reply, so he moved to five feet. Finally he stood directly behind her and said, "Honey, what's for dinner tonight?"

She turned around and yelled in his face, "For the fourth time, I SAID CHICKEN!"<sup>1</sup>

"For the fourth time, chicken," in Elsenheimer speak means, "I've said it so many times, you don't even hear me anymore." How many times does God have to say, "I love you" before we hear it? "I am the Good Shepherd. I will not leave you. You are mine."

Perhaps it is the Shepherd thing. To Jesus' community of believers, second century Palestine, they got it. It was a parable, a short tale that speaks a universal truth. What if it was a parable of today, like the parable of the 'Good Dog' or the 'Good Cat' (is that an oxymoron)? Herbert Brokering has written *Dog Psalms and Cat Psalms, Prayers my Cats/Dogs Have Taught Me*.

Listen: "I am dog. God, I am vigilant even when my eyes are closed. I listen even when there is no sound. I look when there is nothing in sight. I keep watch with you. I wake quickly where there is need and will hurry to help without being told. I am vigilant, ready to stand or flee. I run in the dark and know where to find help. You do not leave me alone. I am ready to go, for you are already there."

Or, "I am cat. O God, my soul will fight, defend, protect what is mine. My soul loves the life you have given me. I want my space, my time alone, my holy place, my own room. I will not be destroyed, abandoned, lost. I will not let anything steal away my faith, my love, my honor, my home. My soul will scratch, howl, chase, risk—and defeat. I will not be beaten because you are strong within me. I may be hurt and wounded. May bleed and suffer. I may grow weary and weak. But I will not lose what is mine. O God. I want your life in me."<sup>2</sup>

During Lent we sang psalms, psalms of joy, psalms of lament, psalms of ascension, and psalms of living in the valleys of the shadow of death. Like the ancient Hebrews, like the early Jesus followers, we sang our faith and our doubts, our hopes and our longings. There was mystery to our singing? Holiness? A yearning for God's promises to ring true in our ears and our hearts once again? For the fourth time, chicken! I will not leave you alone. You are mine. I am the one. I am your path to God, God's path to you once again. Henri Nouwen

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<sup>1</sup> <http://funlok.com/index.php/jokes/bad-hearing-06052008.html>

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Brokering, *Cat Psalms, Dog Psalms*, Augsburg Press, 2003.

said “we are not loved by God because we are precious, but we are precious because we are loved by God.”<sup>3</sup>

We are precious, each of us, as individuals, and we are precious as a community of faith. Have you ever noticed that there is no “separate singular form of the word ‘sheep’”?<sup>4</sup> Likewise, “there is no such thing as an individual Christian.”

This past weekend at the Southwest Conference Annual Meeting, Rev. Cameron Trimble spoke about church growth and church multiplication in the United Church of Christ. She said in the United Church of Christ, three congregations close every week and we plant/start .7 congregations every week. Do the math, friends. Congregations close because two congregations merge and become one, because they have declined to the point of the last one out shut off the lights, or they leave the United Church of Christ, primarily over Open and Affirming, welcoming of all stances. Like Church of the Beatitudes. Like now the Southwest Conference. Congregations opening their doors to spiritual seekers, people who come seeking community, not committees, people who are seeking intimacy with God and others, not dogma, people who are seeking authenticity, not fake. The Strengthen the Church offering goes to supporting leadership for the starting of new congregations and renewing established congregations.

If you have been to one of the roll-out dinners or luncheons about our plan for the future, Grow, Grow, Grow, Transform, I cannot say enough how it is not a plan for growth for the sake of growth, numbers. It is growth because that is our call from God, for the sake of the Gospel. To grow a congregation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to spiritually strengthen the congregation we already have, to grow us all in spiritual depth, in spiritual health, in spiritual mission and service.

To grow us to be so alive that people who come to us walk on our campus, see our art, sense our hearts, hear our words and know of our works, that those people say, “Wow, I want some of that red Kool-Aid that they are drinking.” What is it that those people are drinking, eating, hearing? I want to be a part of that energy, love, compassion, hope, joy, justice, mercy, kindness. Being Christian is not an individual sport. It’s not about me and what I want. Or you and what you want. It is about being a community of Jesus the Christ, the good sheep-herder, the shepherd, the ‘I love you with my life’ guy, for the fourth time chicken. A baptism for Ku’u MomiMakamai Kehaulani Nobles (I’ve been practicing) isn’t just for her, but for all of us to reaffirm our baptisms, our belongingness in the whole flock. Breaking bread together and sharing one cup isn’t just for us alone, but for the community to recognize the risen Christ. I grew up in a church that ate the bread separately as a symbol of our personal relationship with Christ and held the cup until all were served and drank it as one as a symbol of our oneness in Christ, our community, our wholeness as one people. Our prayers, our songs, our sharing the Peace of Christ remind us the Christian life, while it may be on the endangered species list, is a vital life, and can be a contagious life. What if the Christian life were a pandemic, spreading so quickly, bringing life, not virus, bringing hope, not fear, bringing community, not alienation? Nancy R. Blakely draws this picture for us:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/may-3-2009-fourth-sunday.html>

<sup>4</sup>

“The life of a shepherd was anything but picturesque. It was dangerous, risky, and menial. Shepherds were rough around the edges, spending more time in the fields rather than in polite society. For Jesus to say, “I am the good shepherd,” would have been an affront to the religious elite and educated. The claim had an edge to it.”<sup>5</sup> “I am the good shepherd,” was never said by Jesus but by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian community who were saying, “Now is the time. Now is the time. God’s world needs our voice, now. Now more than ever. Panic reigns. Fear leads. Souls are being lost to confusion and uncertainty. But not here. Here, souls matter. What matters to you matters to us. No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey...I’ll let you finish the sentence. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/may-3-2009-fourth-sunday.html>