

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 12, 2009

LIFE IN THE BALANCE

When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them,
and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. *John 10:4*

Before the summer months claim too many of us to well earned vacations, I wanted to offer some thoughts about keeping the competing claims of life in balance, in particular about keeping a balance of recreation with the rest of life. So what I mean by “life in the balance” is intentionally ambiguous—life “in balance” when life is tested. Psalm 23, speaks of the security we may feel in thinking of God, the great shepherd of our congregation, even when it feels like we are in “the valley of the shadow of death.” It is a tremendously comforting theme, providing, of course, one stays in sight of the shepherd.

A second text, John 10, speaks of Jesus as the good shepherd who calls the sheep by name, calling them out of the security of the fold (the comfortable and familiar) and leads them into the open and vulnerable places of the wilderness; vulnerable, yet still protected. The shepherd carries a staff to rescue, and a rod (a heavy stick) to defend the sheep.

One of the beautiful images of shepherding in the Bible that has always intrigued me is that the shepherd leads the flock, testing out the ground, looking for places of shelter and nourishment, facing the problems before the flock encounters them.

As a young boy in northwest England I spent many vacations on a relative's sheep farm nestled on the lake District moorland. It lay between an idyllic cluster of antique villages with names like Crosby Ravensworth and Maud's Meaburn that could have dropped out of Thomas Hardy's fictive Wessex. They had hundreds of sheep, and to move them my Uncle John would let his sheep dog out of the back of the Land Rover (this was not your Mainline Range Rover!) and drive the sheep with the English Collie from behind, the dog darting in great pincer-like sweeps on either side as it responded to my uncle's whistled commands, worrying the sheep across the wiry tufts of gorse and heather. It seemed on reflection to be an awkward enterprise—like pushing filings with the repelling pole of a magnet. But it worked. Of the two, the biblical model of leading the sheep seems so much more productive: of trust, of partnership and of respect. There is an integrity to the process, like Jesus calling us and inviting us by name, but not coercing us into following him. All it asks of us is a will to follow after, and four good legs.

Four good legs. What might that mean for us? Clearly, four is better than three.

Let me switch the metaphor for a moment. A traditional Greek cross is a symbol with four equal arms, like the one in the Red Cross logo. A Latin cross, a more familiar symbol in worship, stands on longer vertical pole, as would have Jesus' cross. The Greek cross I have in mind was in friend and hospital chaplain's office in Charlotte, North Carolina. In each of its four sections was printed a single word, *worship, study, play, work*. At the center of the cross was the name of Christ. Then around the perimeter of the poster were four grotesque representations of the cross when the elements were not in balance; when work ballooned to consuming proportions, or when too much play, for example, distorted the relationship of the other three.

But back to Jesus' parable, and let's substitute the four arms on the cross for the four legs on the sheep, the followers. It's a parable, of course. We aren't asked to think of each other as a flock of bleating Hampshire's! Nevertheless, it's tough to follow the shepherd—Jesus—on only three good legs, when one or more legs are deformed or dysfunctional.

Worship, study, play, and work. Perhaps the first thing to remember is that they are *not* really distinct, not separate entities—the four legs, that is. They are all connected to the same nervous system and the same

brain. They get orders to cooperate in moving the animal to the same location. And they work best when they find the right rhythm; when they cooperate with each other.

The same is true of worship, study, play and work. It wouldn't be appropriate to burst into a full-throated rendition of *A Mighty Fortress* in the middle of a board meeting, or as a client is about to sign a hard-won contract. But it is appropriate to ask for the Lord's guidance in the process, and to remember to say "thank you," especially when good things come, just like we teach our children to. WORSHIP has its place in work, and very necessarily so. If our sense of God's presence, wisdom, moral guidance and compassion cannot be exhibited in the place that often consumes our energies the most, then we are suspect in our allegiance, wouldn't you say? WORK is, after all, where God's gifts to us take root to produce the fruit that feeds us.

I recall the story of the man who found himself in a European hotel room far from home, fearful and distraught that his life, consumed with the affairs of business and the acquisition of things, was suddenly facing the stark emptiness of it all. In a desperate plea to climb out of the pit of despair he fell to his knees and tried to pray, but he could think of no words, no way to let his heart speak to a long forgotten God. Only one short prayer would come to mind out of a very distant past: "Now I lay me down to sleep."

All work and no prayer makes God hard to find.

Worship involves prayer and personal devotions. It has a personal and private dimension to it as well as the corporate one we know on Sunday mornings. But E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary teacher, sees a dimension to the prayer life that he calls simply—our speaking to God.

STUDY answers the question, having spoken, how do we then listen to God? Study is how God speaks to us. It is not the only way God speaks but there are few more direct ways.

The Word of God in Scripture has such an extraordinary range of application that a verse that speaks one way on one day may answer a quite different need on another. By way of example, I recall reading John 14 one time, the familiar "mansions" passage that is so often used at funerals, when an interpretation struck me that I had never had before. I must have used the passage a hundred and fifty times or more. It was the verse that reads: "In my Father's house are many rooms . . ." *Many!* A multitude of rooms. Rooms for a fantastic spectrum of opinion and diversity in faith, in style of worship, and in tradition. Perhaps I half knew that, but the insight grabbed a fresh hold on me and reminded me powerfully of just how wide are the arms of God. It does not mean that God accepts everything on the human agenda. It does mean, I'm sure, that God makes no distinction among the truly faithful (fanaticism is not faithfulness but blind idolatry). Of course my head knew that God welcomes a vast spectrum of souls, but I think my heart had some catching up to do. The journey from the head to the heart can, after all, be the journey of a lifetime.

If my study is only an esoteric thing, the rubber never actually meeting the road, it is as if one leg is left curled underneath the body in an unproductive limp. To seek to be Christian without study, without nourishment, is like expecting some unseen hand to perpetually leave food out for us whenever we happen to be hungry.

And then there is PLAY, that curse on the Puritan ethic. Nothing reclaims the best of the child in us quite like play. The Bible says virtually nothing about play, but it does say a lot about *re-creation*, from which word we make a synonym for play—recreation, the act of reshaping, of making something or someone over in a new form. It makes one a different animal. I suspect that the best play can have a spiritual dimension to it.

A little over a month from now we'll be high in the North Carolina woods, climbing Little Piney Knob and Lookout Mountain, rock-hopping down a bubbling mountain stream, poking in the undergrowth for secreted wild flowers, laughing at old familiar stories—the more endearing for their familiarity, listening to nature's song among the trees, and building a crackling fire in a picnic hearth in the woods at a place called Monkey Bottom (no, I don't know how it got that name), then drifting into sleep to the sound of water splashing down a nearby mountain stream. There's a mountain stream nearby everywhere in Montreat. Play touches the natural heart of things, like good friends and nature.

Worship, study, work and play. Four good legs to follow after Christ. Like vital organs they need each other. They need a healthy balance, each strong in its own parts to make us whole. For Jesus' sake. Amen