

---

## *The Good Shepherd - Mother's Day*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**The Fourth Sunday of Easter**

I know a lot of us are marking this special day today. It is Mother's Day! Happy Mother's Day!

But bear with me as I personally mark another observation today. Today is the twentieth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. "Twenty years ago today, Sergeant Pepper taught the band to play." My Sergeant Pepper was a priest from Massachusetts, a dear and brilliant man named David, who taught me much. He had never ventured down South much; in fact, he was a self-proclaimed Yankee. He was fascinated by my southernness, as I had been fascinated by his northernness. He was the guest preacher for my ordination to the priesthood. Twenty years ago, today, he said something like this:

"There are two kinds of shepherds in Israel. There are northern shepherds and southern shepherds. They lead sheep differently. The northern shepherds lead their sheep by ranging out in front of the flock. They are always ahead of the flock, pulling the sheep onward, and sometimes so far out ahead - searching for fresh water and new territory - that the flock cannot see them. On the other hand, the southern shepherd stays with the flock. The southern shepherd even stays at the back of the flock and pushes them forward - tending and caring and cajoling."

"Sam," that northern priest said, at the end of the sermon, "be a southern shepherd."

Well, I've actually tried both ways of shepherding in my ministry. I've succeeded at both, and I've failed at both. But I've also learned that the northern style works as well as the southern style. Shepherds come in just as many styles as sheep do. Sometimes our church needs the northern style of shepherding, and sometimes we need the southern style.

Sometimes we need southern shepherding, and sometimes we need northern. Sometimes we need eastern, and sometimes we need western. Sometimes we need warm and cuddly, tender loving care. And sometimes we need correction and direction.

After all, shepherds have to reprimand sometimes. When sheep want to go their own way, shepherds have to corral them back. They have to use curved sticks, crooks, to grab their flocks by the neck and pull them back into line. When that happens, it does not feel good. It feels like the shepherd does not respect us and love us. We may cry and want to leave the flock; but the good shepherd is not going to let us, no matter how hard we cry.

Mothering is like shepherding; they both come in all shapes and sizes, in all different styles. But the good shepherds, like good mothers, share one critical character. The good shepherd, said Jesus, lays down his life for the sheep. The good shepherd is unselfish.

Now, I know we all need a little selfishness. We need to think of ourselves in order to survive, and even to help others.

But I want to speak about selfishness today. Have you noticed the massive selfishness which pervades our time right now? "Everything has to be about me," as someone put it. When I think of city decisions, I think about me. When I think of

family decisions, I think about me. When I think of church decisions, I think about me. "What's in it for me?" Sometimes it seems as if we who have enjoyed so much in life actually are the ones who want more and more. Selfishness is always wanting something.

The opposite of selfishness is caring for the other. In fact, the opposite of selfishness is being a good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life, said Jesus. The gospel for today is not just about how Jesus is a good shepherd; but maybe it IS about us! Leave selfishness behind, by being a good shepherd. How can we be a good shepherd?

Who do you shepherd? Who are you shepherding right now? "Who do you care for?" is not the question. The question is Who are you caring for? Who are you consciously trying to care for, and to shepherd along life's way? Who are you nurturing? Who are you guiding along a rocky path?

For whom did you leave the trail? Have you ever turned around from your direction, have you ever turned back in order to help someone coming after you? Did you ever scramble down the mountain rocks in order to help the one who fell?

Whose hair are you brushing, as a shepherd might tend to the sheep's wool? Who have you cleaned up after? Not for pay, not grudgingly, not with bitterness. Who are you cleaning up for?

Jesus said that the good shepherd would lay down his life for the sheep. And Jesus did. The sheep, that is, the disciples, did not understand exactly what that meant - even after it happened - but they believed him anyway. Essentially, Jesus wanted to show the world what the real power of love is. The power of love is such that Jesus could let the rulers of this world crucify him, he could let the rulers of this world deny love - but love would not deny them. Jesus was resurrected from the dead to show us that love always wins.

There will be people in our lives who show us the same thing. They will deny themselves, they will even lay down their lives, for our sakes, because they love us. One of those people, I hope, will be our mothers. Who can deny that one of the prime characteristics of motherhood is the courage to lay down your life for someone you love?

That is what mothers will do, even when they do not want to do it. They will delay their own fulfillment and gratification in order that their children can enjoy fulfillment. And, of course, it is not just mothers who do this. It is anyone in a mothering role, even a father, or a godmother, a grandmother. They are all good shepherds, who lay down their lives for those they love. Yes, we do give thanks for them today.

But we also dare to follow that role of good shepherding ourselves. The journey out of selfishness is the journey to being a good shepherd.

If we follow the journey out of selfishness, we will discover, one day, that we are not the center of the world. This is a hard realization for most of us. We grow accustomed to people bending their lives for us. We cry and smile and change people's lives.

But one day, we realize that we are part of a larger community - our Church, for instance- and we are part of a neighborhood and part of a city, and part of the kingdom of God. Our mother -and father- and those who love us, our shepherds, will continue to love us and care for us just as much as they did when we thought we were the only one alive - but it may not feel like it. We will feel jealous and envious and left out.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, mentioned this fact when he spoke with his disciples. "I have other sheep," he said, "not of this fold. I must bring them in also." Many Christians do not understand that movement. Unfortunately, we act like our own children when it comes to letting God love other people. We really like the Good Shepherd loving and taking care of us, but we get upset if the Good Shepherd leaves us to go take care of someone else.

This, too, is part of our journey out of selfishness, and into good shepherding. The world does not revolve around us, even if it seems we have enjoyed so much. The world does not even revolve around those who have loved us, our mothers, fathers, parents, and friends.

The world revolves around the One Good Shepherd, who shows us what true love is like. That love can be northern or southern, or eastern or western. True love comes to us in many different shapes and styles. It is certainly the reason I was ordained a priest, and I hope it is the reason each of us gathers here today.

We gather in order to revolve around love. The world does not revolve around us. The world revolves around the Good Shepherd, who is the great caretaker and source of love itself. The world revolves around love, which has brought us into the world, -love, which inspires mothers and grandmothers and godmothers to give of their lives, -love.

The Lord is my shepherd. Love is my shepherd. I shall not want.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

---

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*