Well hello, lovely to be seen by you all. Before I begin today I want to note that this Sunday is the one year anniversary of my ordination to the diaconate and I want to thank each one of you for the role you have played in a most blessed year.

Now, may I speak to you in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

There’s a line in today’s reading that is of great comfort to a new preacher such as myself. I don’t know if you caught it but John wrote, “Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.”

Even Jesus himself offered up what he must have thought were perfectly good sermons featuring excellent metaphors or parables and the people just didn’t understand him. Sorry Jesus that one went over their heads. Never mind, you’ll hit a homerun next time.

Here’s how my holy imagination works. I picture these two fellows, just regular guys who lived at the time of Jesus. I’ll call them Herbert and Harvey. Now Herbert and Harvey are mostly concerned with the daily stuff of life, going to work, going home to their wives, making sure their kids have decent sandals on their feet. They’re also interested in self improvement. These are the sort of people that hit the self-help section of the book store. So they hear that Jesus is in town and decide to go give him a listen. Herbert and Harvey want to hear some wisdom. Like all of us they want someone to look up to.

So I picture Herb and Harv in the crowd, maybe off to one side but listening intently. Wanting, thirsting for the words of life, a little wisdom to live by. After the parable they’re walking home:

“So, what did you think Herb?”

“Oh brilliant, yeah, first rate. You?”

“I quite liked the bit about the sheep.”

“Me too Harv, me too, and the shepherd.”

“Oh absolutely good stuff there, the shepherd stuff.”

“So, ah, Herb what do you reckon he was talkin’ about?”

Oh you got me there Harvey, No clue really but wise, eh? Very wise?

“That’s what I was thinkin’; I’m not entirely sure what he meant but I could just tell he was lovely.”

This is just sort of a scene that makes me smile. I’m actually going to come back to Herbert and Harvey in a bit.

Let’s take a look at this parable. The great thing about the parables and metaphors that Jesus used is that each time you read them something different stands out for you. This morning I would simply like to highlight a few things that spoke to me this week. I want to make a couple of observations about shepherd and then a couple about sheep.

One of the things that occurred to me this week was the shepherd doesn’t own the sheep. The shepherd works for the guy that owns the sheep. The shepherd’s job is to lead the flock to good grazing grounds and watering holes and then back again safely.

Depending on where the landowner lived the shepherd was often pasturing his sheep for days or weeks on end. At these times he lived with the sheep. Shepherd and sheep travelled together, took breaks together, bore the same weather and at the end of the day slept in the same fields. Basically the daily experience was the same for the shepherd as the sheep.

One of the most deeply appealing truths of our Christian narrative is that in becoming our shepherd Jesus lived with us. He is intimately familiar with our daily life experience. It pleases me to no end that I pray to a God that knows exactly what it feels like to stub your toe on an exposed rock. I love that my shepherd knows the feeling in that moment when you get caught in the rain and you’re a long way from shelter so you just kinda shrug and say to yourself, “I’m just gonna get soaked today.” Then delight in the child-like abandon that follows. You know that feeling, so does Jesus.

The intimacy engendered by Jesus’ incarnation is at the heart of why I’m a Christian. We get to pray to a God that empathizes, that understands as a result of genuine personal experience. For me this means that many of my most powerful prayers are statements “Jesus I’m sad tonight.” “Jesus it feels like my friends don’t understand me.” Or on the positive side, “Jesus, I stopped by at my friend Dave’s unannounced today, we had a beer and a laugh. It felt good.” I can pray this simply to the almighty creator of all things confident that for his part he is listening, crying or laughing or just nodding because he knows exactly what I’m sharing. The value to me is that we don’t have to take our prayers to a benevolent supreme being but to a God that’s been there, a God who gets it.

Another pleasing thought that occurs to me when I think about the shepherd not owning his sheep is that his role also calls for obedience. Just as the sheep follow the shepherd so the shepherd is following the will of his boss. In worshipping Jesus, we don’t worship a shepherd who calls for an obedience that he in turn didn’t also live out. When it feels like a compromise of my desires to follow the Sheppard I can be assured that he felt the same way. Just as it’s easier to love a loving person or deal honestly with an honest person so too it’s easier to follow Jesus knowing that he devoted his life to following his Father.

Today is unofficially called “Good Sheppard Sunday”. I love the fact that we follow a shepherd that literally walked (and continues to walk) with us, that actually knows the pounding heat of a summer afternoon and the blessed cool of evening. A shepherd devoted to following his master even as he calls me to follow him

 Let’s turn our attention to the sheep.

For me this week the most obvious thing about sheep is that they belong in a flock. People, like sheep are creatures of the flock, we belong in community. In truth of course we belong in a variety of communities. Our families are one flock to which we belong; there is also town, our church, teams, clubs, all sorts of flocks. What we are not is solitary. I think this is worth looking at.

Western society has gone in some regrettable directions over the last couple of centuries; chief among them has been a move towards individualism. Somewhere in the not too distant past our society began to glorify the individual. We created myths that elevate “the lone wolf”,” the self-made individual”. This elevation of the “I” is counter scriptural. Today’s parable compares us to sheep and like sheep we are best suited to life in a flock.

There is no suggestion anywhere in the God’s great story told in the bible that we are meant to be alone, that individualism is to be sought after. The God of scripture relates to people in community. Those of you in our bible study group have heard me say this before but the only features shared in common by every book in the bible share is that they were meant to shared aloud in community.

This is not to say that we don’t each matter individually, of course we do. Scriptures says God know us each by name, he knows how many hairs we have on our head (no jokes here) and the thoughts of hearts. I am by no means suggesting that our personality is somehow lost in the flock. Just that we were created to be members of community.

I’m reminded of another story in which Jesus, as the Good Shepherd leaves the flock of 99 sheep to go and retrieve the one that had wandered away. We have all seen the paintings of Jesus carrying the lost lamb back, cradled in his arms or gently across his shoulders but we do well to remember he cared enough about that individual sheep to bring him back to the flock. Jesus didn’t carry that lost lamb all the way home. He carried it back to the flock and then gently tossed in with the group where it belonged. As people, we were made in such a way that we are at our best, healthiest, most fulfilled self when we are in a flock.

One more thought I had is that the onus on a sheep isn’t all that complicated. A sheep is expected to follow the shepherd. That’s it, just follow the shepherd. We sometimes make this whole Christianity thing much more complex than it is. We are sheep it is to us to follow the shepherd. The Sheppard doesn’t begin his rounds by entering the sheepfold and handing out copies of itineraries complete with rationales.

It’s a funny thought though, isn’t it? Imagine the Sheppard calling his morning meeting to order.

“O.k. sheep, gather round. Everyone quiet down. Hey ewe, join in. (see what I did there with the ewe pun?) So you’ve all been given the circular. I’ll just draw your attention to the map on page three. So you can all see we’re heading south today to Ephraim’s Oak tree. Got it? Good. Then we’ll follow the high ridge to the lower flats. Everyone got it?”

Sheep don’t need to understand. Sheep don’t have to intellectualize or believe the right things, or say the right things. Sheep follow the shepherd. Over the centuries I think we’ve made being a follower of Jesus so complicated and it really isn’t. Just follow Jesus.

Here I come back to Herbert and Harvey. I made them laughably ignorant but they are exactly what Jesus was looking for. So they didn’t understand completely, no one does, even the disciples didn’t understand most of what Jesus said. But they were attracted to Jesus. They wanted to follow and that’s the entire call on each of our lives.

“You know Harvey, I think the bit I liked best was the ending part where Jesus said, ”I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly”.

“I Couldn’t agree more herb, doesn’t abundant life sound wonderful? What do suppose abundant life means”

“You got me there Harv, I don’t know I really don’t but doesn’t it just sound great?!”

Amen.