

Homily - April 26, 2026

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ - risen.

Today is known as "Good Shepherd" Sunday. This is the fourth time during my tenure here for the occurrence of this Sunday. The three previous times were covered by Phil Proctor while Nanette and I were off island visiting our family in Alaska. Since Nanette and I spent 43 years in Alaska before coming here, most people might assume I was a country boy or woodsman. The truth is, however, that I grew up in a relatively large city. I never fished until Alaska where I seldom fished and I still have not ever hunted. Unlike our son, Joe, who absolutely loves the outdoors, the vast majority of my activities outside of work occurred inside gyms, so the idea that I might have an "irrational fear" of sheep is entirely plausible but probably not accurate. That is a long winded way of saying I do not know much about sheep or shepherds or farms or even cows and crops.

I have occasionally in the past used graphics from the *Naked Pastor* website who actually uses sheep in many of his drawings. My original intent for the day was to share numerous versions of his sheep drawings until I realized he mostly uses sheep in his drawings about LGBTQ+ issues. And although those are important issues for Christians and churches to discuss and respond to, that was clearly not going to be my focus for today. Sheep, shepherds and the Gospel of John will eventually be our focus, but first some brief comments on our other readings.

Our first reading from Acts really focuses on two things. First, and this is reminiscent of part of my homily from last week, they focused on fellowship and breaking bread together. Jeremy Williams in his commentary this week on this reading from Acts addresses this point in this way, "*The community broke bread and ate together daily. Whether these meals were primarily Eucharistic or not is beside the point. The point is that they were doing life together.*" I think eating together is a time when we should be able to be ourselves with one another. The second thing for us to focus on from this reading is that they saw themselves as a community, an ohana, if you will. I am going to string together four sporadic sentences from Jeremy's commentary that speak to this focus. He said, "*This community understood itself in partnership with each other and with God. At this point in Acts, it is unambiguous that the Spirit-led community that trusted Jesus as the Anointed One understood their economic life as social and communal. Rather than mimicking Rome and taking away what people need, this community shares so that everyone has what they need. The community in Acts 2 has mutual aid as its foundation.*" Can anyone name a current, modern phrase I often use that describes this attitude? Yes, counter cultural. It is counter cultural to **most** of the culture displayed for the Israelites throughout the Old Testament. It is counter cultural to the Roman empire culture and, in fact, all empires cultures. It is counter cultural to most, if not all, cultures today, especially the United States' **vaunted** culture of capitalism.

Our second reading from First Peter 2, paints a pretty ugly picture of suffering lives. The Sundays and Seasons introduction says this, "*Doing the right thing does not guarantee that one will not experience difficulties, hardships, rejection, or even suffering. Here Christ is presented as the model for our path of endurance and loyalty to God, particularly amid adversity.*" Friends, good people experience good and bad things in their lives just like bad people experience good and bad things in their lives. As someone once said, the sun shines on everyone and the rain falls on everyone. I just like to say that God did not promise us a rose garden.

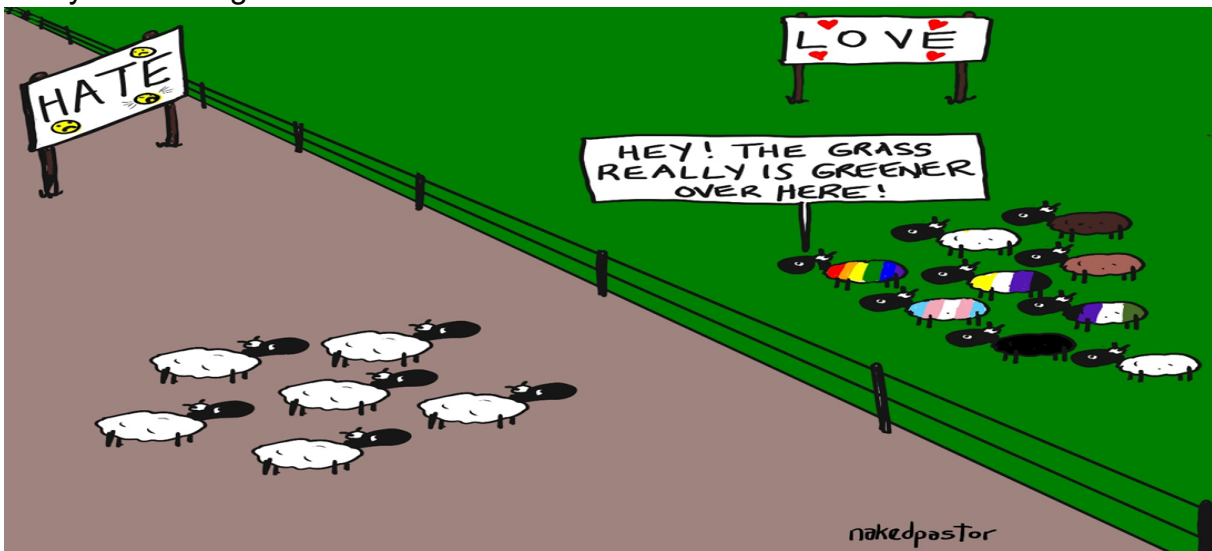
Homily - April 26, 2026

Our well known psalm today functions as a bridge between our reading from Peter and our gospel. It has references both to travails and to God as a shepherd.

The Gospel of John is unique compared to the other three gospels which are called the Synoptic gospels because of their similarities. The Gospel of John provides an emphasis on the theological underpinnings to Jesus' life and mission, and talks about signs instead of miracles, and does not use parables. Finally, the Gospel of John is unique in that it is the only gospel with Jesus' "**I am**" statements, which can be viewed as either first person or third person statements. I have commented on this concept before and indicated that I lean toward the latter perspective, that Jesus is referring to God by God's chosen name with Moses – **I am**, not directly Jesus' self.

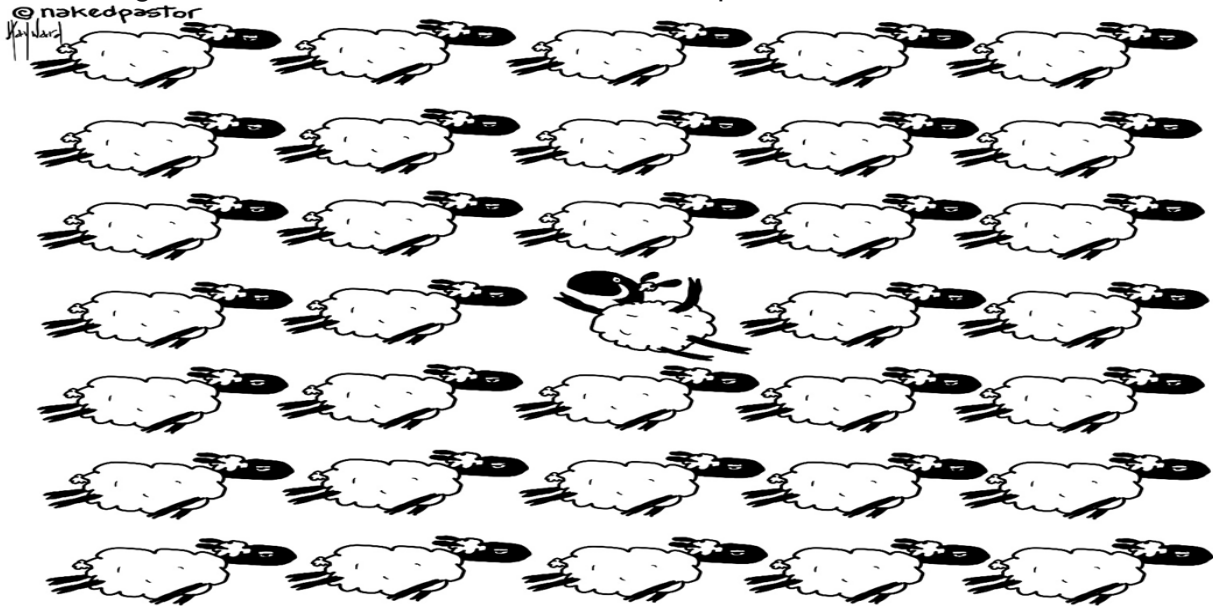
The tenth chapter of the Gospel of John is sometimes referred to as the Good Shepherd chapter. Why? Well, one of my seminary professors, Karoline Lewis, points out that the tenth chapter of John is split by the lectionary into three parts and each part is used in different liturgical years. She also points out in her commentary on this reading that it is what is often called the discourse following Jesus' healing of the man blind from birth in chapter nine. She goes on to point out that much of the two chapters, 9 and 10, of John comprise a structural pattern used elsewhere in the fourth gospel of sign – dialogue – discourse.

Finally, for this homily, Karoline points out that the Greek word translated as gate here could also be translated as door and then she says that "the image of the door draws on the notion of inside and outside first articulated in chapter 9 with the blind man being thrown out and then reiterated in the sheep pen in chapter 10 verses 1 through 5." Also, the language in this chapter is often used to be exclusionary and **that**, Karoline says, is "counter intuitive to the theological premise of the Fourth Gospel, that God loves the world." Here is a Naked Pastor graphic that I think portrays this thought:



Homily - April 26, 2026

Artificial Intelligence, AI, told me in response to my question about sheep that “Sheep are profoundly gregarious animals; meaning fond of company, social; their primary defense strategy is a strong flocking instinct that provides safety in numbers. They become stressed when separated from the group, relying on flock synchronicity for survival.” The following Naked Pastor graphic is meant to challenge us to ourselves but it also shows sheep in a flock:

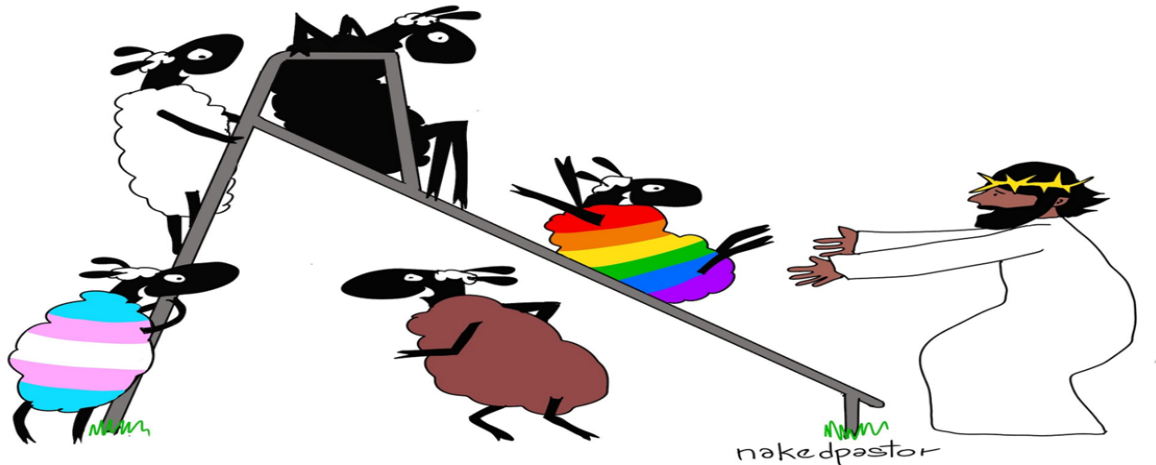


So, if sheep flock, what do shepherds do? Well, the following is part of the AI answer I received. “Their duties extended beyond mere oversight; they were tasked with leading their flocks to pastures, ensuring access to water, and protecting them from predators. The shepherd’s ability to maintain the health and productivity of the flock directly impacted the community’s prosperity.” Bill Boelter in his God Pause devotional on our gospel reading said this about shepherds, “In some places of the world shepherds still tend flocks of sheep just as they did in Jesus’ day. We saw this in evidence when we traveled in Israel. It is also the case that these shepherds will sometimes bring their flock into a fenced area for the night and then lay down across the opening to guard the sheep from predators. Jesus’ uses this image to give courage and strength for those who wish to follow him. While we often think of Jesus at the center of our lives, here he gives us an image suggesting that what comes into our lives must come through him. When other voices strive to sway us, Jesus is the filter through which we evaluate these other words. Jesus is the one who guards against the pressures to be self-serving, over consumptive, xenophobic, racist, or hateful. We trust his words to give us life that is abundant.”

Hear then the good news:

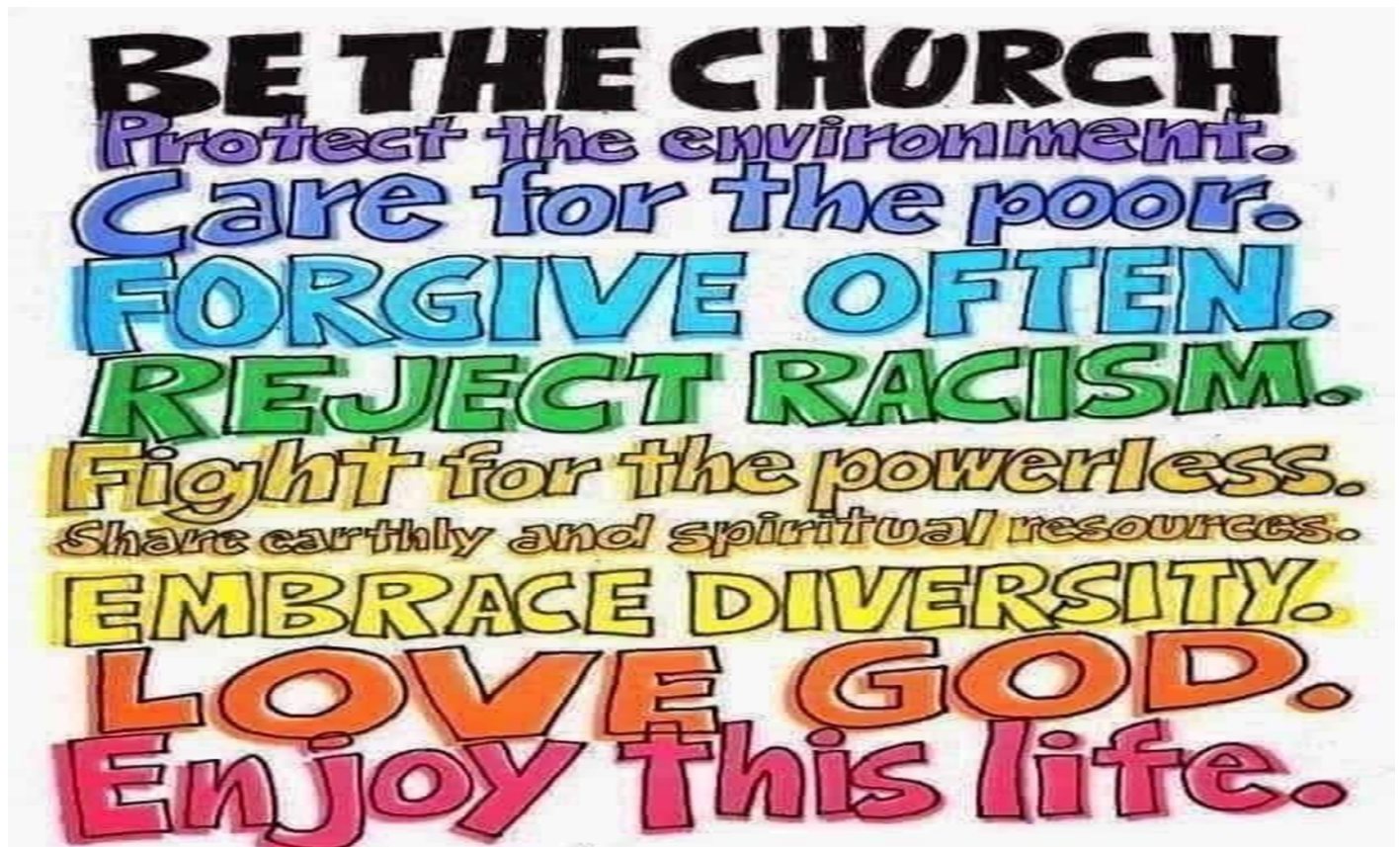
We live in both God’s kingdom and the world and we are challenged to live our lives both abundant joy and abundant love.

This Naked Pastor graphic displays joy to me and some even think Jesus is laughing in it. What do you think?



The words that accompanied this graphic are, “Each sheep represents the beautiful diversity of humanity, joyfully playing together. It’s a reminder that love doesn’t ask us to hide who we are. It invites us to walk boldly in it. And to have fun doing it. This is choiceless and nonpartial compassion!”

One final graphic, not from the Naked Pastor, but from the United Church of Christ;



Grace and peace to you my friends, this week – be the church.

Amen