

# 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration: April 17, 2016

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The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco, CA

Text: John 10:11-16

Title: Celebrating the soul of St. Mary's

*In the name of our living and loving God. Amen.*

Welcome to this special celebration of St. Mary's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As noted in the bulletin, we've made some adjustments to make today's liturgy more accessible. Were this really 1891, today's Eucharist would have taken two or maybe three times as long; there would be much less music and far fewer words spoken by the congregation; there'd be no passing of the peace; and this sermon would have lasted about an hour, maybe longer, and most definitely would not have been given by me (I'd be meekly seated in the pews with the other women, wearing a very large hat).

So I think it safe to say that even on a day when we gather to celebrate our traditions, in true Episcopalian fashion, we also celebrate progress! This is an ongoing, millennia-old dance for the Church – how to cherish our heritage while following the Spirit forward; honor tradition while celebrating innovation; look back with courage while embracing the present moment. Celebrating St. Mary's this year has made me curious about what really defines this community over time when so much has actually changed.

This is always a good question for an institution to ask, or an individual. Let's think of ourselves for a moment. What makes me me, and you you? And what makes us the same person over the course of years and decades on this Earth? It can't be our bodies alone, because their shape and size change as we grow, and as cells die and new ones are constantly regenerated, a lot of the molecular material that makes up our bodies now is different than the stuff that made us up five, ten, fifteen years ago – or even five, ten, fifteen days ago. And yet, I'm still me, and you're still you. We could say our genetic code is unique, and on some level that's true. But it's also true that how genes are expressed changes over a lifetime, and the decisions we make and experiences we have turn certain genes on and off at particular moments. And yet, I'm still me, and you're still you. Maybe our unique memories and relationships are key ... but, then again, those also evolve.

If we really think about it, it's just as hard to pin down for a parish. What's makes St. Mary's, St. Mary's? It can't be the building, because 125 years ago this place didn't exist, and when it was completed in October of 1891, it wasn't exactly as it is now. Most notably, the altar was switched around with the back doors. In the first months after our founding, the earliest members worshipped wherever they could: in private homes, an abandoned grocery store, a political meetinghouse. In more recent history, during some construction in the 1990s, members worshipped in the Presidio. As we experience this morning's liturgy, we realize it's also not the words we've prayed that have remained the same, the people allowed to be ordained, or precise theological beliefs that define us.

In traditional Christian parlance, that unchanging, eternal essence of a person, which is so hard to locate and describe, is called the soul. It is the pattern of who we are, the unique image of God planted in each of us. And it seems to me that is what we are really celebrating this year: the

unique patterns and gifts of this community, expressed in relationship to God and to one another. This morning's Gospel can be helpful as we try to hone in on the soul of this community.

When I think of the Good Shepherd, the first image that comes to mind is stained glass. The Church I served as a seminarian featured a lovely window with Jesus holding a shepherd's crook, balancing a child on one knee, and patting a content little lamb with his free hand. The image is so ... quaint. And, really, lovely in a way. But it's unlikely this is what Jesus had in mind when he said, "I am the good shepherd," and even less likely this is the image that came to mind for those listening. In Jesus' time, shepherds were not much for polite society. They spent most of their time in the field doing dangerous, menial labor. For a teacher to describe himself as "the Good Shepherd" would be a bit like a spiritual leader proclaiming today, I am the good migrant worker; or the good dog-catcher. Someone who does necessary, even honorable, work, but not work we'd describe as cutting-edge or innovative; not work that'll get you a corner office or a book deal or an interview with Oprah.

And yet Jesus insists on this image and spends a good bit of time developing it. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and is known by them. He gives his life for those entrusted to his care. He pays attention to their movements, goes after them when they get lost, and is constantly gathering others into the fold. Sheep are herd animals – they do not do well in isolation, and rely on each other for safety and companionship. But this family is held together by the shepherd, the one they trust, the one who is always just a step ahead, helping them to navigate the landscape, showing them the way. It's a powerful image for any Christian community.

When faced with the dangers of our times – isolation, anxiety, complacency – Jesus responds to our deepest yearnings for companionship and community, calling us out of our comfort zones and into courageous, wholehearted lives – together - in a way that only he can. Because he knows us, and is known by us, and has earned our trust. The stained glass Jesus is nice, but the Good Shepherd isn't afraid to get his hands dirty; to wander in the dark night seeking the one who lost her way; to fret about finding provisions and keeping us safe; to hold us when we are hurt and reassure us when we are scared.

Being a "good" member of the fold doesn't mean never getting lost, because we will; and it doesn't mean being independent or strong - God knows we need God, after all. Being a "good" member of the fold means trusting the Good Shepherd, and caring for one another along the way. To say that St. Mary's is a community committed to trusting and following Jesus, our Good Shepherd, in each particular time and place, is a bold and faithful claim. We see this in our historic commitment to the education and enrichment of young people, a core value from our founding out of a pre-school on the outskirts of the city. We see this in our centuries-long commitment to serving those in need, supporting and sustaining organizations that shelter and nurture the most vulnerable members of our community. We see this in the legacy of strong lay leadership in this community, in the grace and grit of those who have stuck with St. Mary's through times of growth and times of trial; in the willingness to live into the questions, rooted in tradition, and growing in the Spirit.

As we celebrate the soul of St. Mary's the year, and lay foundations for the 125 years ahead, may we keep our eyes and our hearts trained on God, trusting the Good Shepherd to see us through, as he has so many times before. **Amen.**