

The Hobart Lecture
Diocese of New York
30 September 2008

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Greetings from Episcopalians in all the other parts of this Church: in Micronesia, Taiwan, Honduras, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Haiti (our largest diocese), Dominican Republic, Virgin Islands (both US and British), Puerto Rico, and the Convocation of American Churches in Europe, as well as the other 99 dioceses in the United States. They pray for you, and I urge your prayers for them. I begin this way, not only because I usually do so when I'm visiting dioceses, but because most Episcopalians don't have a sense of the broad reach of this Church – of the many pastures in which the sheep of this Church live and move and have their being. The third bishop of New York, for whom this lecture is named, was a strong supporter of mission in varying contexts, including among the Oneida Indian Mission. It is to that sense of diverse pastures that I want to turn.

Pastures are where pastors labor, pastures support the life of the sheep themselves, and among most people who live away from the land, pastures are usually ignored or forgotten. When we think about pastoral care, our attention usually moves quickly to the sheep, without enough attention to the environment that sustains them. Paul Newman's obituary in the NY Times this weekend ended with some pertinent words. He said, "We are such spendthrifts with our lives. The trick of living is to slip on and off the planet with the least fuss you can muster. I'm not running for sainthood. I just happen to think that in life we need to be a little like the farmer, who puts back into the soil what he takes out."

Tending the soil is a great part of pastoral work. It is important to the whole of the flock and the whole ecosystem. The Western plains ecosystem was dominated by bison (buffalo) until fairly late in the 19th century. Those great grazers actually had a creative role in fostering the diversity and productivity of the plains. The bison were hunted almost to extinction for their hides, for sport, sometimes intentionally to deprive Native peoples of their livelihood, but also to make room for cattle and sheep. Competition between cattle and sheep herders, and lack of care for that great pasture led to great range wars in the Western U.S. in the 19th century. Because sheep will chew the grass down to the roots if you leave them too long on the same ground, the cattle ranchers who shared the open range often shot the sheep, and sometimes their keepers. Now, pastors in the church rarely shoot other species, but verbal violence sometimes accomplishes the same thing. We may tolerate or encourage attempts to remove species of Christians who seem excessively different. The irony of the range wars is that pasture land is most productive when it is intensely managed for the benefit of many species – either by free-ranging herds well-adapted to their ecological context, or by careful human intervention that moves the flock or the herd from one small pasture to another every few days.

Those bison moved fairly freely across the plains, never staying too long in one place. Their mobility contributed to the health of the pasture, and to its diversity. The

tall-grass prairie is one of the most diverse and productive ecosystems in North America. The very act of grazing encourages a flush of new growth in the grass, and if the animal doesn't keep chewing on the same patch for too long, that productivity soon results in a greater harvest for the whole system. I don't think it's too great a stretch to think about how chewing (or ruminating) on a theological or spiritual issue at great length affects the health of the flock. The gatherings of Christians whose pastors build permanent high fences to keep the flock from exploring other pastures rarely thrive over the long term. Those communities who have enough freedom to wander over to another patch of grass, who don't perseverate or obsess over three clumps of grass in one corner, have a greater chance to thrive. No species of grazer can stay healthy if kept on the same ground for long. The grasses suffer, and so do the sheep. And when animals are confined too long in one place, parasites thrive.

So what does a reflection on tending the pasture say to us pastors and shepherds? We could be quite literal at first and ponder how much effort we're putting into our role as gardeners. If we don't steward this planetary pasture more wisely, our role as pastors will soon be vastly more difficult and, before much longer, moot. What is your congregation doing in the green department?

Most of us begin with the relatively easy, local initiatives like changing the light bulbs to compact fluorescents, or examining our use of disposable items, and then move on to upgrading building insulation and heating and cooling systems. Old buildings can be a challenge, but many have found creative ways to install photovoltaic systems on the roof and even power-producing windmills. General Seminary is doing the geothermal drill. Those who have the opportunity to rebuild or build anew can explore the latest in low-carbon or sustainable building footprints. Doing that kind of work in the congregation can be a remarkable teaching opportunity that will raise the skill of other pastoral gardeners in their own homes and the larger community. Discovering how much waste a congregation produces, and how much can be recycled, is another way of teaching and even changing community norms. There are still too many local communities that make no provision for recycling, or have only inadequate programs.

In the same way that frequent moving of the flock can raise the productivity of the grassland, recycling reusable resources brings another kind of abundant life. I saw a great example in New Hampshire this last weekend. St. Andrew's, West Manchester is collecting and sharing food with the hungry through its food bank. They are collecting and sharing clothes and other hard goods with those in great need. They are renovating an old house behind the church parking lot to both provide an apartment for a low-income family and provide a more accessible space for their thrift shop. In the process, they're offering ministry opportunities for seniors and the otherwise unemployed to share their gifts with others. That is good pastoral care at almost every level – it's simple and yet profound.

There is another kind of soil-tending, and soul-tending, that goes hand in hand with this sort of gardening. Inviting the flock into theological reflection about the importance of caring for the earth and its inhabitants is a central part of our ministry. It almost inevitably leads to a more abundant and lively understanding of the interconnectedness of creation, and our part in caring for the whole. When we serve the hungry and naked and homeless, we also heal the whole body, including the folks in our

own congregations who engage that ministry. In serving the least, we serve Christ himself, and the whole of his Body.

This is not rocket science, but it does require the ability to share the pastoring load. Shepherds are also sheep, after all. Our ability to invite others into pastoral ministry, like that pattern of intense grazing, ultimately increases the harvest. It's impossible for one person called pastor to have all the creativity necessary to develop a complex ecosystem of servant ministry. The sheep also have God-given intelligence. Bless the ideas that get floated in your congregation – take a Gamaliel approach to the latest crazy inspiration, for it just might be of God. Let somebody run with it and see what eventuates. Consider the possibility of unlikely shepherds – even the children may lead us. In fact, they probably know more about climate change and ecological systems than the senior citizens in the congregation.

Discover how local initiatives impact people across the globe. The current fiscal debacle in this country right now is already teaching us all a great deal about how overgrazing by some, probably better called greed or gluttony, and how it has disastrous consequences. Pastors have a responsibility to challenge the spiritually unhealthy. But the coming months and perhaps years are also going to teach us something about the ways in which moving the grazers around might actually increase the forage. Sheep may grow fat on lush grazing, but too rich a diet can produce digestive upset and foul the pasture.

I want to reflect on the pasture in another way, literally in what it provides to eat and drink. How does our own diet affect others? What's the origin of the bread and wine for our sacramental meals? How is that reflected in what we put on our dinner tables? There is growing consciousness about those issues and their complexity, and they all have rich theological roots and implications. Pastoral ministry has a significant responsibility to teach, challenge, and explore the connections between what we eat and what kind of body results. It's the very foundation of our eucharistic theology, which should equally influence our daily fare. The economics of food in this country, and increasingly around the world, depend excessively on petroleum and on corn. Oil subsidizes the production of fertilizer as well as the perceived need to till and otherwise prepare the soil. We've seen how a shift to the so-called biofuels has removed a great number of calories from the tables of the poorest around the world. At the same time, our own food is increasingly corn-derived, with terrible health consequences for us and for the environment. Cattle were not created to eat corn, but rather grass, and while hamburgers and steaks may be produced more rapidly on corn, it is at great cost to the health of the cows, those who eat them, and the "pastures" called feedlots which would better be called manure factories. The overdependence on corn in our food supply also means that excess harvests are rewarded, which only depresses prices in developing nations where that staple food is most needed. Good pastoral care of the pasture and the flock would insist that the pasture needs to be encouraged to return to a semblance of the diversity in which it was created. At least part of the system must return to grazing on grass, where the natural products of the herd return to fertilize the system rather than becoming point sources of pollution. Our lack of trust in the created order is reflected in our over-management and waste of resources, from tractoring the field several times in a season to feeding cattle on corn and antibiotics and then having to treat the waste they produce as hazardous material.

Do shepherds drive their flocks hundreds of miles to sample a seasonal delicacy for a day or two and then return to their origin? Or do they wait until the local delicacies are in season and then move the flock a few hundred yards? Long-distance migrations are the exception in nature, as they are immensely wasteful of calories. The source of our food, whether distant or local, is an intensely pastoral issue. The energy used to bring us grapes from Chile in February ultimately limits the diets of others. By insisting on a diet of long-distance food, we are slowly becoming cows of Bashan.

Lest you think this is a frivolous conversation, think about how much energy goes into the debates over whether or not churches should offer gluten-free wafers or alcohol-free wine at communion. We are deeply invested in the quality of our eucharistic food; part of the challenge is to extend that to our daily bread.

When communities (or flocks) begin to dig into these pastoral issues, they discover the connections between food and justice, environment and poverty, corn and starvation in sub-Saharan Africa. And another pastoral ministry ensues – learning how to do political work, which is an essential part of building the Reign of God. Politics is pastoralia, and if you don't believe me, consider the kind of society that Jesus and the prophets are continually dreaming up. It begins with that vision of the heavenly banquet, enough for all and enough to spare for a feast, no one eating the bread of anxiety, no one forced to eat on the run for fear of following armies. Jesus fed people for a reason, and he kept an open table for the same reason. Political pastoral ministry is about helping to build a society where that abundant table is open to all, and it's going to take all the wisdom of serpents and the naiveté of hopeful doves. Effective pastoral ministry equips parishioners to share the political labor, in the ministry of developing just and peaceful communities. I hope your sermons in the next few weeks will encourage all your flock to share in that pastoral work and cast an informed ballot.

Let's talk about another aspect of pasturing the flock – fences. We've already reflected on the benefits of moving the flock from one small section of grazing to another, and doing it frequently. Real shepherds use flimsy electric fences or dogs to keep the flock corralled. The church uses things like the lectionary, and Lenten series, and mission priorities, to keep the faithful focused on a particular part of the pasture for a short period of time. It's astonishing how much change people will put up with, and even thrive on, when it happens on a predictable schedule! Which may be a helpful reminder when some begin to chafe at being urged to move on. We soon get bored, and obsessive, when we stay too long in one place – we were not created for monotony. It soon sickens us even unto death. The church has never been eternally unchanging, even at its most byzantine. Some among us do still remember that early Christians called following Jesus the *way*, they didn't call it the *stay*.

In order to function effectively, the fences cannot be too high or too rigid. They have to give clear boundaries, but be capable of being moved so the sheep can feast on new pasture. Christianity has thrived in new contexts, particularly ones of oppression and want, where people are starving for food that sustains. But the fences around the re-emerging church in China are somewhat different than the ones around the church in Sweden. In both places they are nurturing the flock in similar ways. Jesus himself seems to acknowledge the reality that there are varied flocks in pastures that are now separated: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." The question is when; in the meantime, the pastoral task is to

prevent the fences from becoming so petrified that they can't be moved, so high that new sheep can't enter, or so dangerous that they maim any sheep who try to go exploring. Jesus' pastoral fences were pretty minimal – and he kept on moving: “the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” Fences can also function to keep out predators. The challenge is always to know which is a wolf in sheep's clothing and which a sheep in wolf's clothing. Jesus didn't seem to worry a whole lot about which was which, except to say that the ones that try to sneak in probably don't have the best interests of the flock at heart. Fences that are built of fear or fences that deny the ability to wander within limits are life-denying; they do not lead to abundant life. They only result in gnawing the grass down to nothing.

Caring for the flock includes what has traditionally been thought of as pastoral care –assisting the ewes to deliver healthy lambs, marking or branding the new members of the flock, nursing the sick, carrying the weak for a time, and driving off predators. There is also the ongoing need to ensure that some sheep don't bully others or keep them from grazing. Managing the herd dynamics has often been the most challenging part of the shepherding we do. Sheep may push each other around competing over a choice bit piece of grass; human beings tend to do it over where to put the coffee pots. The competition is less consuming when there is abundance, which is another reason to keep the flock moving.

Finally, let's return to the shepherd. The shepherd must eat as well, not forgetting that s/he is also a sheep of the Good Shepherd of us all. The one who does forget soon sickens and may starve. Drink deep of the water that springs up to life. Eat your fill of the food that does satisfy. And remember to share the pastoral work – learn from your parishioners, encourage their creative forays, and keep going in and out by the gate. Our task is to cooperate with the abundance that God has given us, in ways that will lead to a feast for the whole created order. Then we may indeed hear, “well done, thou good and faithful shepherd.”