

*A sermon given on Sunday, April 25, 2010  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### ***Encountering Wolves in Shepherd's Clothing***

It's the Fourth Sunday of Easter, often known as "Good Shepherd Sunday." This is the Sunday when we try to forget how dumb sheep are reputed to be, so as not to be insulted by the biblical metaphor of the Lord as our Shepherd and us as the sheep. Today's familiar Psalm 23, the Gospel, the Collect of the Day, and hymns like that which we have just sung – there is much today which points to that familiar image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, the one who cares for us and calls us each by name, the one who is, as Scripture puts it, the "shepherd and guardian of (our) souls." [I Peter 2:25]

The image of shepherd is often extended to members of the ordained ministry. Bishops carry a shepherd's crook. The term "pastor" comes from the Latin word for "herdsman." We are meant to be good shepherds ourselves, we clergy. And much of the time, by God's grace, we manage to fill the role. But sometimes, as we have recently been hearing yet again, some clergy have proven to be not good shepherds, but predatory wolves in shepherd's clothing.

The stories in our newspapers over these past weeks and months have painted, as they have in prior waves of similar revelation, a picture of colossal violations of trust. The scandal is not only in the abuse of children by priests called to care for them, but also in the church hierarchy's complicity in this evil – its frequent pattern of protecting the perpetrators instead of protecting future victims. This has been a tragedy first and foremost for victims and their families, and a wider tragedy for others who have lost their faith and trust in the church. A shadow has been cast over the Roman Catholic Church and its priesthood especially, but the defilement is not neatly contained in Roman quarters. I find myself hesitating these days as I put on my black clerical shirt. I have experienced that same feeling before in my 23 years of ordained ministry, during those earlier cycles of tragic revelation. Where once I put on the clergy shirt as an unambiguous symbol of pastoral servanthood, it now seems to carry a shadow as dark as the shirt itself.

All of this is uncomfortable to talk about. But such discomfort is precisely what has allowed so much of the abuse to continue. The taboo against speaking publicly about child abuse simply enabled abusers to continue. Nothing has been more damning to the church than evidence of its silence. Silence in this context is not helpful, not healthy, not holy. So let me say a few words about all of this: a word of information; a word of caution; and a word of theology and hope.

First, a word of information. In the face of all that you have read about abuse, prevention, and response in various places, you should know what your own church has done and is doing to be a safe, healthy place for our children. In a timetable roughly parallel to that of society at large, the Episcopal Church

has grown in its understanding of child abuse issues. In the early 1990s, clear policies were formulated for dealing fairly and compassionately with complaints; background checks became routine for clergy transferring from one diocese to another; and psychological testing became more rigorous for persons seeking holy orders.

By the mid-1990s, training programs were required not only for clergy but also for lay professionals and volunteers having contact with youth. The current version of this training, entitled "Safeguarding God's Children," covers the recognition of symptoms of child abuse; how to follow up on cases of suspected abuse; and most importantly in the long run, how to configure the life of the parish and its programs so as to prevent the opportunity for such tragedy in our midst.

In the past few years some six dozen or more members of St. Paul's have participated in this program – mostly church school teachers and youth volunteers, Youth Council and Church School Board members, teenaged Peer Ministers, and those who have gone to volunteer at Reading Camp, or similar programs. Trainings will be scheduled this year in May and June, prior to the Harlan and Reading Camp trips.

Often when told that they will need to have this training in the church, people are startled and regret the necessity. After the workshop, however, there is universal appreciation for the church's open and honest determination to be a safe and holy place. You should know that any of your clergy, or Kate Gillooly, or the bishop's staff, is available to talk with you about these issues, should you wish.

Now, a word of caution. It's easy for those of us who are not Roman Catholic to write this off as a Catholic scandal. Perhaps we imagine that if the current crisis forces the Roman church to change its insistence on the celibate, male priesthood, all will be well. This is a naïve and myopic viewpoint. Of course many of us dearly hope that the Roman church will one day re-evaluate its position on the ordination of married clergy and women. But I for one would like to think that when the day comes that Rome ordains women it will be because (as we already know) women make great priests and have manifold gifts for ministry, not because men turned out to be predatory sinners.

In any case, child abuse is not unique to the Roman priesthood. It plagues other churches; it plagues non-religious institutions, as well. The Episcopal Church and other Anglican provinces have had our own share of such scandal. In Canada, entire Anglican dioceses are facing bankruptcy from litigation and payments involving past abuse in Indian missionary schools. New revelations and litigation has been in the news this week involving Scouting organizations. Educational institutions have faced similar cases. Sin and abusive behavior do not know ecclesiastical or vocational boundaries. The depth of the current scandal in the Roman Church must not be an excuse for furthering any anti-Catholic prejudice. It must be a time for humility and continued vigilance in our own house. And it is a time for us to learn from what we are hearing and seeing. It is a time for renewed understanding of the

true meaning of repentance and amendment of life, without which apologies are meaningless, and talk of forgiveness is an appeal to cheap grace. The word 'repentance' means 'a change of direction.' Saying you are sorry, without any concomitant depth of self-examination and amendment of life, is an incomplete model of Christian penitence.

Finally, a word of theology and hope. Some eight years ago, when the last wave of scandal and revelation hit – especially in the American Church, Pope John Paul II referred several times to sexual sin as a part of the *mysterium iniquitatis* – the “mystery of evil.” Evil, of course, is a mystery. We don't understand precisely where it comes from; we don't understand how it takes hold of us. But the trouble with invoking the label of “mystery” is that too often it has been used to end some conversation which is getting the better of us. When our children ask us hard questions and we don't want to struggle with the answers, we say, “Well, that's just a mystery!” Every parent and church school teacher knows the line. It's supposed to be clear to the child that they should stop asking the question! To say that evil is a mystery was not an adequate answer to questions about abuse in the church a decade ago, and it will not be an adequate answer this time around either.

Christianity proclaims that God's goodness is most powerful when it is made tangible, made flesh. The Incarnation of Jesus, the ongoing embodiment of Christ in members of the church – this, we say, is God's goodness made present to us. So also, evil is not principally experienced by most of us as some amorphous, malevolent force. It is most vivid, most painful, most destructive, when it is enfleshed, made real to us by the actions of real people. Of course evil is a mystery, but this makes evil actions no less in need of confrontation.

It's all about honesty, transparency, and accountability. Where our own church and others have been secretive and unaccountable, abuse of various sorts has gone unchecked. Where our church and others have been transparent and accountable, health has been promoted. Bad and nasty things grow in dark places. Bringing in the sunlight drives out the unpleasantness and grows healthier things in its place. That is why I am hopeful in the long run about contemporary changes in the church. Because I believe there are, by God's grace, fewer dark corners, and more places where the light of Christ is invited to shine.

On this “Good Shepherd Sunday,” may we pray for shepherds of every description, including those in the Church. May we pray for the healthy and sacred care which the Church – *all* of us in the Church – extend to others within the flock. May we pray that Christ, the “shepherd and guardian of our souls,” would likewise be the model for our own care of one another, individually and collectively, in the Church.

*The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack, if I am his, and he is mine forever.*

*And so through all the length of days, thy goodness faileth never:  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house for ever.*

*[Hymn 645, vv. 1 & 6]*