

- A reading from the Holy Gospel according to St. John: "Truly, truly, I say to you, "anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the door "but climbs in by another way is a thief and a robber. "But the one who enters by the door "is the shepherd of the sheep. "To this one, the gatekeeper opens. "The sheep hear the voice of the shepherd, "who calls them by name and leads them out. "After bringing all of them out, "the shepherd goes before them. "And the sheep follow, "for they know the shepherd's voice. "A stranger they will not follow, "but they will flee away. "For they do not know the voice of strangers." This figure Jesus used with the disciples, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus said again, "Truly, truly, I say to you "I am the door of the sheep. "All who came before me are thieves and robbers. "But the sheep did not heed them. "I am the door. "Whoever enters by me will be saved "and will go in and out "and find pasture. "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. "I came that they may have life "and have it abundantly." This is the word of the Lord. One of the deepest needs of the human heart, it seems to me, is the need to be appreciated and cared for. Every human being that I know at least wants to be valued and to be understood for who he or she is. This is not to say that we need accolades of praise and adoration to be constantly heaped upon our heads; for though that may be a desire for us from time to time, that is not fundamental to our existence. Perhaps we could say that every human being wants to be loved. But even that hints of ambiguity. There are as many variations on the understanding of love as there are species of flowers. And too often those understandings limit our idea of love to something romantic. Something which is so fulfilling, or something merely sexual. There is, however, a deeper need, without which we cannot exist and that is the need for acceptance. Every human being craves to be accepted without fear of abandonment. Nothing in human life has such a lasting and fatal effect as the experience of not being accepted. When a person is not accepted, then something in that person is broken. A baby who is not welcomed is severely impaired or even ruined at the roots of his or her existence. A student who does not feel accepted by his or her teacher certainly will have difficulty learning or may not learn at all. A worker who does not feel accepted by his or her colleagues on the job will suffer from interminable tensions and anxiety, probably making life miserable at home for everybody else. A life without acceptance is a life in which a fundamental human need goes unmet. And so in three of today's lessons we are confronted with the image of the shepherd as one who accepts us in our broken condition, promising never to abandon us, and even who lays down his life for us. The beloved 23rd Psalm depicts Yahweh as the shepherd of Israel. While the gospel from John applies the shepherd image to Jesus, who calls us by name. The epistle reading expands on the image of Christ as shepherd, reminding us of our former status as straying sheep who have been rescued by the shepherd and guardian of our souls. In our own time and place, a shepherd, of course, is a rare sight, so removed are we from the lifestyle which they live. Yet the essential relationship between sheep and shepherd remains the same. According to today's lessons, the sheep are well-known to the shepherd and understood. They follow the shepherd, for they know his voice, unlike the stranger, whose voice they do not know. The shepherd can be trusted never to abandon them. He leads the hungry sheep out that they might find pasture for sustenance, calling them by name. Such frequent biblical references to the relationship between shepherd and sheep therefore, continue to enlighten us about our own relationship to God. I'm struck by the importance of being called by one's name when I realize the number

of times that doesn't happen in our world. Have you ever answered the telephone, only to get one of those annoying computer voices announcing that you are now eligible for a new credit card? How dare you intrude upon my day with yet another reminder of my anonymity? I want to shout into someone's ear, but there's no one's ear there to shout into. Perhaps you've heard about a children's book called *Whobody There?* And *Whobody There?* is about the difference in being whobody and an anybody. Anybodies send out mail in envelopes with windows in them. But whobodys send out mail with your name printed on the front, with real handwriting that you recognize. Anybodies call to see if you need new siding for the house or another magazine subscription or maybe a tuneup for the car. Whobodys call up and ask for you by name. You can't wait to see how whobodys are doing and when you'll see them again. You would never consider a whobody an intrusion. The Psalms reminds us that no one can know us and value us like God. Yahweh, you examine me and you know me. You know if I am standing or sitting. You read my thoughts from afar. Whether I walk or lie down, you are watching. You know every detail of my conduct. Read Psalm 139. Not even our own parents had a way of knowing if they wanted me specifically, which may be a good thing when you think about it. At best, they wanted a boy or a girl. Only God wanted me uniquely, for who I am. What a gift to be known and accepted by God as I am and not for what I do. When people are appreciated for what they do, they're not really unique. There's always the chance that someone else could do the same job a little bit better, more efficiently, maybe a little more creatively. But what a waste of precious energy to spend our lives looking over our shoulders to see if someone is encroaching on our territory. Is he or she doing a better job than I am? Do they represent a threat to my security? What does the rest of the world think of me in comparison? God doesn't think in those terms at all, or anything like them. When people are accepted for what they are and not for what they do, they become unique and irreplaceable personalities who do not have to live under the shadow of comparisons. Indeed, we need assurance of God's acceptance in order to be our best selves. When we don't feel accepted, we're a nobody or perhaps an anybody, according to the whobody book and we cannot make peace with ourselves. We resort to boasting of our accomplishments, rigidity in our relationships, aggressive behavior, or any number of other ways to grasp at an identity. But when we do feel accepted, we can gratefully and peacefully answer to our own names without clinging to false identities. I don't have to try to be the person that I'm not. Likewise, I know that I'm accepted by God as I am and not as I should be. Not that God glosses over our shortcomings. To the contrary, to deny the defects of a person is to fail to accept that person. To truly know someone's defects is to touch the depth of that person. Such are the invaluable lessons of marriage and of an enduring friendship. Rather than forsaking us when we go astray, God seeks out the lost and celebrates their return. And the best part of all is that God's mercy never runs out, thank goodness. Because I never am as I should be. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. God persists in calling us by name. Well that's all well and good, you're probably thinking, "I have faith that God loves and accepts me "and so I'm here rather than on the golf course "on a beautiful Sunday morning. "But while you're on the subject, preacher, "if God is really a shepherd to God's people "why is my Aunt Jane, a long-term church supporter "and the most generous woman I know, "suffering from breast cancer "when I've been praying for her to be healed? "Why are the couple next door about to split up, "when they've been seeing a pastoral counselor for a year? "Why was the teenager down the street "killed by a drunk driver "when he'd only recently joined the church? "Where is God when they need him?" Paul Tillich talks about faith as the courage to accept acceptance. The courage to accept God's acceptance of us. Now this may be an idea that doesn't strike you right between the eyes at first. To a certain extent, we've all

become products of an era that makes believing as easy as falling off a log. Thanks to TV Evangelism, we live with a popular image of faith as mostly sweetness and light. And so we hardly know how to deal with challenges to faith. Why is it courageous to accept acceptance? Because faithful, innocent people do suffer, even our own families, even ourselves. And we want to cry out, "How can God permit this? "Why me? "Where's the good shepherd now?" Unlike mindless sheep, who roam around in a herd, doing what they are told, God gives us wise to question our faith and to try to make sense of our own experience. Is it any wonder that for a thinking person, at least, it does take courage to believe in God's faithfulness? No matter what happens to us. Rabbi Harold Kushner, whom you may recognize as the author of *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, visited in Durham this past week. And he brought with him story after story illustrating exactly this point. His own story centers around the life of his son Aaron, who suffered from a rare disease called progeria and died at age 14. Progeria, which means rapid aging, destines a child never to grow very tall or to grow any hair, but to look like a very old person as a child and to die in his or her early teens. Now Rabbi Kushner and his wife had grown up with an image of God as an all-powerful, all-wise parent figure who would reward them if they were obedient and loving. God would, in turn, protect them from being hurt and from hurting themselves. Tragedies were supposed to happen to selfish, dishonest people whom he, as a rabbi, would then try to comfort by assuring them of God's forgiving love. How could such a tragedy be happening to him if God were truly a just god? He couldn't help thinking. And so he struggled with this for years. Either God is all-powerful but is not kind and fair or God is kind and fair but is not all-powerful, he concluded. Rabbi Kushner came down on the side of the latter and wrote a best-selling book to explain his views. Though much of what he said in that book has proven to be controversial, he did say something which has been universally agreed upon. And that is that people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost very often find their prayers answered. They discover they have more faith and more courage than they ever knew themselves to have. The widow who asks on the day of her husband's funeral, "What do I have to live for now?" yet in the course of the ensuing weeks finds the reserve to wake up in the morning and to begin to look forward to the day. Or the man who loses his job and says, "I'm too old and tired to start all over again." But he starts over again nonetheless. Rabbi Kushner himself commented that prior to the news of their son's illness they would never have imagined that God could strengthen them, not only to endure but to celebrate the short life that Aaron lived. Yet God sent to their side a caring and sensitive community, bearing the love of God, like the man who made Aaron a scaled down tennis racket suitable to his size or the woman who gave him a small, handmade violin which was a family heirloom, or the children, who overlooked Aaron's strange appearance and physical limitations to play ball with him in the backyard. Such friends, such caring, were God's answer to prayer. Why do innocent people suffer with God as our shepherd? The conventional explanation that God sends us such burdens because he knows we're strong enough to handle them or that perhaps because we've done something to deserve it are cruel misinterpretations of scripture. Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a young bride-to-be whose fiance was killed in a car accident just three days before their wedding. At the hour when the wedding was scheduled to occur, his memorial service was held instead. Afterwards the young woman cried out, "If one more person tells me God did this to make me strong, "I'm going to scream! "Why do they want me to hate God?" For whatever reasons, God did not choose to create a perfect world. Flaws of nature, for instance, which govern so many aspects of our lives cannot tell the difference between good and bad. An earthquake causes a highway to collapse and people are killed. A genetic defect causes a child to be born mentally handicapped, a car which crashes into

a tree at high speed most likely results in death or serious injury. People, on the other hand, can tell the difference between good and bad but are free to choose. And so tragically often choose evil over good. In offering us such choices in life, God obviously took a very big risk. It led his only son to die on a cross, but it also led God to reveal his power over sin and death through his resurrection. God never promised us a world free of pain and disappointment, but what God did promise is to see us through. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil. For thou art with me. We are not alone in our pain. God does provide provide the strength and courage in time of need to survive life's tragedies and life's unfairness. God continues to call us by name, in both the good times and the bad, and promises to redeem our suffering in the end. It takes courage to believe in God's faithfulness no matter what happens. God's promise never to abandon us is unfathomable. God's love for us is infinite. We can never grasp it or get hold of it, much less control it. About the only thing we can do is to jump into its bottomless depth and it always takes courage to jump. It has been said that faith is like a person climbing a very high ladder and while standing there, he or she hears a voice which says, "Jump Sally. "Jump Mary. Jump Paul, John, Jennifer, David, Jane. "Jump, my child, and I will catch you." The one who leaps: that is the person of faith. Perhaps you yourself have been perched on a very high ladder when you thought you heard someone calling your name.