**Shepherding Gospel Values**

**Narrative Lectionary Pentecost 3**

**June 25, 2017**

Psalm 23 Russell Mitchell-Walker

John 10: 1-10

A few weeks ago I went to the Canadian Church Leaders Conference, hosted by [Connexus](http://connexuschurch.com/) Church and [Carey Nieuwhof](https://careynieuwhof.com/) in Barrie, Ontario. Their church has a mission to reach the unchurched and do so by encouraging those who attend to build relationship with those who do not go to church and invite them to come. 60% of those who attend this church do not have a history of attending church. We were told that 94% of churches are losing ground against the communities they serve. I was challenged to consider what it might mean for us to focus on reaching the unchurched. I learned a number of things about of how to be more welcoming and inviting to guests who have never been to church, including good signage, greeting in the parking lot, as well as in the building, assuming guests are always in the room, having them fill out a new here or first time card, having coffee invite cards, and many other strategies. It is all about welcome and making people comfortable. Most people make a decision about returning within 7 minutes of arriving in the building. One aspect of welcome is using peoples’ names and learning names, so name tags are important part of this.

The gospel reading today talks about the Good Shepherd who knows each of his sheep by name. They recognize his voice and follow him. They will not follow any other voice. While Jesus is identified here as the Good Shepherd, we too are called to be shepherds to those who are in our community and those who are new to our community. Knowing each other’s names and ensuring people feel welcome and safe or comfortable is an important part of community. Jesus knew this. He also says he is the gate which can seems kind of odd when you think about it. One Commentary I read helped explain this. It told the story of a biblical scholar meeting a shepherd in the Middle East who did not know the Bible so would not have known this story. The interaction and conversation went something like this:

The shepherd was showing off his flock as well as the penned-in area where his sheep slept every night. “And when they go in there,” the shepherd said proudly, “they are perfectly safe.”

But then the scholar noticed something. “Your sheep sleep in that pen and yet I just noticed that the pen does not have a gate on it.”

“Yes, that’s right,” the shepherd replied, “I am the gate.”

“What do you mean?” the man asked in startled wonder.

“After my sheep are in the pen, I lay my body across the opening. No sheep will step over me and no wolf can get in without getting past me first. I am the gate.”

So the shepherd is the gate and lays down across the opening to protect the sheep. This is the message Jesus has for us. He will lay down his life for us, like any good shepherd will. He wants to protect us and keep us safe. He wants us to be at peace, not only in the sheepfold, our homes or safe spaces, but also in the world, leading us to cool clear water, and good green grass. These are all peaceful images and is a commitment and calling that his life, and our lives are to be about peace. Even when they are not at peace, he and God is still with us. That is the message of the 23 Psalm

In the 23 Psalm, probably one of the most familiar Psalms, we read, “even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me”. Just because we are faithful followers does not mean we will not experience difficult, painful or challenging times. So many of us know too well the ravages of cancer, death, illness, pain and suffering. We may get angry because it doesn’t seem fair when tragedy strikes us. But God never promised us that life would be fair. God promised that God will be with us when life is unfair, when we go through painful, dark times. We will not be abandoned. That presence of God includes our experience of the love and support of those who walk with us and sit with us in the difficult times. There is a beautiful scene that reflects this in the movie Lars and the Real Girl. Lars, who has some challenges interacting socially, orders a life size doll of a woman that he introduces to the community as his girlfriend. It takes some time, but the community embraces Bianca, seeing this as a way for him to interact with the community. Then we learn that she has cancer and is going to die. Some women from the church come over to sit.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_flI_f19YTk>

God is with us in many ways even in the darkest times.

In this Psalm we understand much of who God is for us, the ways God is in our lives and how we trust in God. As it says in the worship resource I use, ”In the psalm, we meet a God who cares, who provides, who leads towards stillness and calm, who restores, who directs us towards safe paths, who rescues us from dark valleys, who fights for us, who comforts, who makes provision for us, who anoints us as his very own, who provides life-long love and care, who dwells with us through eternity.” The rod and staff are symbols of Shepherds tools. The rod, is a shorter club like stick that is used to fight off predators, and urge sheep along. The staff is a shepherd’s crook which can be used to rescue sheep from water or to support the shepherd. It was a symbol of concern and compassion. God’s support comes to us in many ways.

Later in the gospel reading, Jesus names himself as the Good Shepherd, one of the many ‘I Am’ statements in John that describe who Jesus is for us. I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Bread of Life, I Am the Way the Truth the Life. Each of these statements are ways for us to understand who Jesus is in the social context of the time and the story. Here, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, gently and faithfully caring for the sheep, willing to give his life for the sheep, unlike a hired hand or ordinary shepherd who only cares about making a living. The reading today ends with the phrase, ‘I came that you might have life and have it abundantly’. Abundance doesn’t mean financial abundance, it is about peace, compassion, joy, and love. On Friday, the Film and Faith group watched the movie [The Big Short](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Big_Short_%28film%29), about the financial collapse of the mortgage market in the US in 2008. It was clear in the movie how the motivating factor for so many in that industry, including those who were trying to uncover the fraudulent activities, was greed. In one [scene](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A25EUhZGBws), Mark, an investor who was suspicious of the system from the start, and had come to learn the mortgages were not stable, was talking to a wealthy investment manager who said his job was to protect the interests of the investors, but had a cosy relationship with Merrill Lynch and was reaping huge benefits from providing insecure mortgages and synthetic investments to Merrill Lynch. Now I only understood about half of it but what was clear was that mortgages and investments were being created soley for profit and not based on any security that they could be paid. As Mark got deeper into the conversation and realized how bad things were he said he felt sick and was going to leave. The investor responded, “you think I’m a parasite don’t you?” and then says society values him very much and offered to tell Mark what he is worth and Mark would tell him his worth. Mark cursed him and walked off. In our discussion after the movie we identified how it was a reflection of our society that we value each other by how much we have. But this is not what God values.

Our call is to challenge the system that values money over people. To hold up the values of equity and justice. Our call is to reach out to those who feel empty as they are caught in these social values and corporate system. Many unchurched may be in this reality. Are we able to reach out to them and invite them into a different reality, a more meaningful reality? In one of Richard Rohr’s [daily mediation](https://cac.org/the-path-of-descent-2017-06-21/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2017-06-24%20DM&utm_content=2017-06-24%20DM+CID_ac75a753fff68d2e101ae03f251bc128&utm_source=Campaign%20Monitor%20Google%20Analytics&utm_term=Wednesday) this week, he shared a quote from Fr. John Dear that reflects the gospel values that St. Francis upheld which are Good Shepherd values:

Francis embodies the Gospel journey from violence to non-violence, wealth to poverty, power to powerlessness, selfishness to selfless service, pride to humility, indifference to love, cruelty to compassion, vengeance to forgiveness, revenge to reconciliation, war to peace, killing enemies to loving enemies. More than any other Christian, he epitomizes discipleship to Jesus. . . .

Francis’ logic points the way toward personal, social, and global justice and peace. If each one of us practiced Gospel simplicity, voluntary poverty, and downward mobility, like Francis, we would share the world’s resources with one another, have nothing to fear from others, and live in peace with everyone.

If we truly lived the gospel values everyone would have enough and we would be at peace with everyone. May we truly work to embody this kind of life. To embrace the love that Jesus embodied, and live a more compassionate, peaceable life, knowing that whatever we face, God is with us.