

Happy Good Shepherd Sunday! If you don't know, the fourth Sunday of Easter is remembered in the Episcopal Church and other churches in this way. You will hear it in our hymns and prayers and the Scripture we read. Every year we get some part of the 10th chapter of John in which Jesus reflects on the Good Shepherd imagery for himself and for God. He also talks about the not so good shepherds that represent failed religious and political leaders.

Shepherd imagery is used throughout the Hebrew Bible and other parts of the New Testament. In Psalm 80 we hear, "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock." And in the psalm for today, Psalm 23, we hear one of the most famous biblical professions, "The Lord is my shepherd." And one of the favorite stories told by Jesus is the Parable of the Lost Sheep.

So this image is important. Yet if you are like me, we have little firsthand experience of shepherds or sheep. I have a feeling it is not like what we see in Hallmark cards and the art in children's rooms. I believe being a good shepherd is so much more than our superficial understanding. What can we say, then, that is not simply sentimental nonsense?

I believe we can start with what Jesus and the biblical writers are trying to describe with this metaphor: **leadership that cares for others**. So often in Jesus' day and before—and still usually today—those with power were most concerned with staying in charge. They looked out for themselves and their allies first and then would give just enough of what was needed to the common people. That is the criticism Jesus and the prophets before him leveled against kings and priests who did not serve God's people as God requires.

But Jesus lets us know there is another way to be a leader. The best example of that is a person who does hard and dirty work that is often unseen and unappreciated: a shepherd. Again I am not a shepherd, so let me qualify all that I am about to say-- it is based on my reading and imagination. So if there are any shepherds out there this morning, if I say something wrong, you can straighten me out later.

The first thing about a good shepherd is that he or she is personally connected to the sheep. It is more than an economic equation, though that is part of it, obviously. It is a connection like a family or a community in which care for **every** member is essential. That is why the Parable of the Lost Sheep is so compelling and descriptive. The good shepherd does not leave anyone behind. He cares for them without questioning whether or not it is a good deal for him personally. To think like that-- "what's in it for me?"—indicates someone that Jesus described as a hired man, not a good shepherd.

Second, shepherds do constant, needed work. He or she cannot get up in the morning and say, "I think I will just let the sheep go today. They will be okay." No, in a world of wolves

and thieves, that type of attitude would be devastating. So a shepherd takes the sheep out to graze and to find water. He helps care for the young and the sick. He helps them to find shelter at night. The shepherd's work is similar to a stay at home mom or a personal care nurse in our society. The work is constant and hard and often unappreciated. That type of worker is the type of leader Jesus says he is-- and calls us to be, too.

Third, a good shepherd comes to know the sheep as more than just numbers and resources to be used. In Jesus' day, and I think in many cultures still today, shepherds would give nicknames to the sheep. Now this is where we could get sentimental. But consider that a shepherd sees that sheep as an individual—the markings and behavior that make him unique—and he remembers that about each one. There is affection and relationship and a sense of community that shepherd and sheep participate in together. That is what real leadership looks like to Jesus—how he leads and calls us to lead, too.

Now Jesus said all this about shepherds in a context. In the prior chapter of John, you may remember, a man born blind is healed by Jesus. If you remember the story, that healing really stirred things up. The leaders—the shepherds—are angry that Jesus healed the man. Instead of rejoicing with the healed man, and giving glory to God, and showing appreciation to Jesus, the leaders felt threatened. They accused Jesus of breaking religious rules by healing on the Sabbath. Their response is the opposite of what good leaders do. Jesus' reflections on shepherds make that clear.

When I think of leaders who follow Jesus' example and teaching, I think of the physician I met in Juarez, Mexico about this time last year. Some of you may have heard me speak about her. Our leadership group visited the clinic she ran and got to hear stories about her work. When we met her, she did not meet our society's stereotype of a leader from central casting—she was about 4'10" with gray hair and brown skin and thick glasses. She did have a winning smile. She spoke humbly yet with real authority that came from her experience and her faith.

She quoted John Wesley to this group of mainly Methodist ministers, "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can." She said it was one of her favorite sayings. But you could tell with her that it was more than words—it was her life.

She was the shepherd of the people served by this clinic. She worked hard to get medical supplies that would help her people. She spent time with them and knew them personally—their family and social situation as well as whatever medical issues caused them to come see her. She was brave. She cared deeply—you could see it in every line of her wise face. Seeing her, I can imagine Jesus saying, "This is what I mean by having abundant life—this woman and how she cares for my people."

For us in our world, if we are not a heroic physician serving God's beloved people in Juarez, what can we do? We are not all called to lead, but we are called to be part of a

community that cares and calls our leaders to care, too. So I would ask us all to consider these three things about being good shepherds and asking our leaders to be good shepherds, too:

First, be connected to people beyond our immediate family and closest friends. Take time and make efforts to begin and develop those connections. If all the people in our lives look like us and think like us and behave like us and talk like us, then that is a clue that we need to shake things up in our lives and in our status. If we spend energy defending our side without listening to people who have a different experience in life, then that is a clue we need to shake things up. Just think of when you have gone through something serious personally—remember how lonely it can feel when people do not understand. So if we have experienced that or at least can imagine it, then we know what to do to reach out to others—take time, listen, give practical help when needed, and be kind always.

Second, be tough. Shepherd's work is not easy. And whether we are leaders or part of a community that leads by caring, we need to do that type of constant, behind the scenes, tough work, too. Be with people who are sick. Care for younger children. Hang out with teenagers. Visit people in prison or a detention center. Get involved politically. Do something that may seem scary to you, but that needs to be done. That's what good shepherds do.

Finally, realize that we can't do this work alone. We need God and God's grace to help us when we fall short or feel inadequate. Ask God for help and for forgiveness. Join a community of people who care and are doing this type of work, too. It is easier to do when we are in community, supporting and praying for each other.

I am glad Jesus and the prophets used the image of a shepherd to show us the way to lead and to care. It keeps us far away from the images of leaders as those surrounded by the trappings of power. Powerful people can become disconnected from the everyday lives of people who suffer and from the people who care for them and make a difference in the real world. As we live through our day in which many say we are suffering from a crisis of leadership, we know the type of leaders that Jesus calls us to be. Amen.