

Jesus: the Good Shepherd

The Reverend Renée Marie Rico
Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ
Sunday, April 25, 2021
Ezekiel: 34:7-16, John 10: 11-18

Sheep

James Rebanks is a modern-day shepherd in the Lake District of Northern England. His family has lived in the area for at least 600 years, and probably for much, much longer. His sheep, an ancient Herdwick variety, are hardy sheep capable of living in the mountains and hills and spending weeks in the common “fells” where the summer grass provides the feed in an ancient system of common lands.

All of this is possible because the shepherds in the area know their sheep and trust one another. When the multiple flocks are brought down to the farms for shearing and other activities, it is crucial that the shepherds distinguish which sheep are theirs (by a painted mark on their fleeces), but also that all the shepherds care for all the sheep as they come in. If you’re a shepherd on the fells, you have to take care of sheep from other farms, because you depend on them to do the same.

This image of shepherding on the fells helps us understand our biblical texts today, which assume a kind of sheep farming that is not all that removed from ancient ways.

The text from John gives us this familiar image of Jesus as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Verse 16 reminds us that Jesus is the shepherd of much more than we who are the church – he tells us that he has other sheep who do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.”

Who are the “other sheep that do not belong to this fold?” Here I think Jesus is reminding us who the body of Christ is following the resurrection – it is expanding and including of all nations, races, and people. The message opens the hearers to the full meaning of what it means to be the Beloved Community and of the requirement of unity so that, as Jesus will tell his disciples in his last sermon to them, “they may all be one” (John 17:26).

In John, Jesus is the great revealer of God’s love by this sacrificial act. Jesus tells us, without reservation, we are enough. He is enough, his love is enough, enough indeed for the whole world, every sheep of every fold.

You are loved, Jesus tells us in John's gospel, no matter what, unconditionally, without mental reservation. Full on empathy for the other.

It matters how we let our children experience others, people that are different from us. Sometimes we help our children understand differences in our own communities. Other times they have opportunities to travel to understand other cultures.

In the one church that I served, one of the younger adult members told me this story of her own formation: When Christin was a teenager (before the fall of the Iron Curtain), she joined a trip that included Americans and youth from behind the Iron Curtain – Soviet Union as we used to call it. The trip afforded the youth the opportunity to travel to each other's countries, something virtually unheard of in those days. So Christin set off with this group of young people and their leaders, in an age when email, cell phones and even reliable postal service in the Soviet Union was unknown. Marge and John, her parents, were brave enough to let her go on this trip, and the exception to the rule.

That trip made a huge impact on Christin – she learned to see those that she had been told to fear as simply people caught up in a fearful system of oppression. She came away knowing that all people deserve God's love and care.

As a result of her experience *then*, she went on to become a consultant to non-profit groups around the world, she then ably traveled the continents to improve their services to the poor and those who need justice. Her work now sought to help those less fortunate than we in the first world. One flock indeed.

Churches can decide to be one flock too. About 20 years ago,² Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in New York City decided to do something simple about hospitality – they allowed the homeless people to sleep outside the church, on the front steps. This church is a wealthy congregation with a large building, and a big pipe organ. It also has a bunch of homeless people in the neighborhood of mid-Manhattan.

This was something that the City of New York didn't like – they wanted the homeless in shelters – of course, but these homeless people didn't want to go to a shelter, so they didn't. The NY City police began to shoo away people from the front of the church last December with threats of arrest – ironically the very season when we celebrate the story of another family that didn't have a place to go.

² “NYC to Fight Ruling on Homeless” by Larry Neumeister, June 13, 2002, The Associated Press.

The logic of the city was different than the churches: The mayor said the city was fighting *for* the homeless. According to the then mayor, Michael Bloomberg: "We think ... letting people sleep outside without bathroom facilities, without security, without a bed, is just wrong. It's not compassionate. We have tried and we will continue to try to convince the church that these people would be better served in the city's shelter system." I can see this point of view – maybe you agree with the mayor. It's hard when very needy people don't accept the help you want to provide.

The church disagreed, and it went to court, where the judge noted the homeless stay at the church voluntarily and if the city sought to stop it, they likely would sleep elsewhere on the streets. The message of Fifth Presbyterian Church to its neighbors, the ones wandering the streets was this – you are enough. You are a part of our flock even when you don't accept the help we offer you.

Conclusion

Theologian Sallie McFague calls this approach, the loving eye – the eye that allows us to embrace intimacy while still being different from each other. It is based on the real, not on fantasies. Experiencing Jesus as the one with the loving eye means that we are inviting then to have the loving eyes ourselves, and to experience that loving eye when we are in need of it too. When we embrace the loving eye that Jesus teaches us, well, then we receive delight beyond compare.

When Jesus talks about being the shepherd, the role is that of protective parent to the sheep. Far from being some impersonal relationship, the shepherd is on watch all the time.

As we ponder this passage, I am left with questions of faith and life:

How will we incarnate the love of this magnificent shepherd? How will we spread his goodness in the wildest of wild places? In the valleys, among the wolves, within the flock he knows and loves? What will it take to recover his fortitude, his courage, his boundless love? We know that Jesus is a shepherd who keeps his promises: he has already laid down his life for his sheep. Now it's our turn. Our shepherd is calling, and his call is trustworthy. But we're free, as always, to resist; we follow what we belong to. Is it him?

Amen.

