
Feeling Sheepish?
Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

According to my calendar, today is “Good Shepherd Sunday.” And so the lectionary provides us with stories about shepherds and sheep. Of course, we had the classic - the 23rd Psalm - “The Lord is my Shepherd”. That Psalm must be one of the best-known pieces of Christian scripture. It is present - in one form or another - at almost all funeral services. It is a piece of scripture frequently requested when I offer to read scripture in hospital. The 23rd Psalm is a source of comfort for many people. And the image of Jesus as the “Good Shepherd” has helped many people find peace in their lives.

Now you don’t expect me to complain about an emphasis on shepherds in scripture. I figure that shepherds should have all the air-time they want. But I do wonder about the imagery and what it means for us today. Let’s do a quick survey. How many of us have a pet sheep at home? How many of us grew up with sheep? How many of us know how to take care of sheep? How many of us have even touched a sheep that was not associated with a tourist attraction or a petting zoo? Is our closest contact with sheep really limited to when we knit?

Presumably in any story about shepherds and sheep, Jesus is the shepherd, so logically, we must be the sheep. But what do we know about sheep anyway? What is commonly known about sheep is that they smell and they are not too intelligent - but neither of those characteristics help me relate to the sheep metaphor.

But perhaps our lack of knowledge about sheep is overshadowed by our lack of knowledge about shepherds. I don’t know about you, but my image of a shepherd comes from the many paintings you see in churches - with a man - Jesus - caring for a young sheep or perhaps watching over a group of sheep. In many of these images, Jesus has a young sheep draped around his neck, or is holding one tenderly in his arms. But I’ve noticed that these images always depict the shepherd as if he’s on a fashion runway. His

clothes are clean. His body is clean. His hair is immaculate. He looks well-rested, well-fed, and relaxed. And the sheep in these images look like pets. If there is one small sheep being carried by Jesus, it looks more like a large kitten than a sheep. It's a very pastoral image, an image of comfort, an image of peacefulness.

But we all know - if we think about it - that shepherds would have been a bit more "rough around the edges". Shepherds spent most of their time with their flocks, which means that they did not spend much time with other people, and in particular did not spend much time with cultured, educated people, or with the social elites. No doubt shepherds performed a valuable function, but they would simply not have been a part of the polite society of their day.

Which leads me to wonder - when John wrote his words did the people reading those words see Jesus being portrayed as pastoral, or as more radical. Would the image of a shepherd have been a strong affront to the religious elite of Jesus's day? Was the image of a shepherd originally an image of comfort, or was it an image of challenge? 2000 years ago, security came from owning land, and from having the military might to defend that land - or perhaps even to expand it. In contrast, shepherds were uneducated, powerless people who used land, but most likely didn't own any. It think it's safe to plead modesty here - and to realize that we do not know what the shepherd image implied to the people who lived in Jesus's day.

Even more to the point, what would a modern version of that image be for us today? According to one source, a modern equivalent might be for Jesus to say, "I am the good migrant worker." That might sound a bit extreme - but I wonder. I wonder.

I want to share one alternative image for Jesus, from the book "God is For Real, Man" by Carl F. Burke. This book from 1966 is a collection of "interpretations of Bible passages and stories, as told by some of God's bad-tempered angels with busted halos."¹ In other words, it's a collection of Bible stories as remembered by street kids and told in their own language. Here's Psalm 23 from the book.

¹ *God Is for Real, Man*, Carl F. Burke, 1966, opening words.

The Lord is Like My Probation Officer²

The Lord is like my Probation Officer, He will help me, He tries to help me make it every day. He makes me play it cool. And feel good inside of me. He shows me the right path So I'll have a good record, and he'll have one too. Because I trust him, And that ain't easy, I don't worry too much about What's going to happen. Just knowing he cares about Me helps me. He makes sure I have my food And that Mom fixes it. He helps her stay sober And that makes me feel good All over. He's a good man, I think, And he is kind; And these things will stay With me. And when I'm kind and good Then I know the Lord Is with me like the Probation Officer.

[discussion - alternative images for Jesus today]

The story of the good shepherd always reminds me of the story of the good samaritan. And there is more to connect those stories than the use of the word "good". I believe that the image of Jesus as a shepherd was scandalous. And the story of the good samaritan is scandalous too. Because the message of the good samaritan is not really "help other people", but rather, that God appears in unlikely places, in surprising places. God turns our prejudices and expectations upside down. The point of the good samaritan story is not that we should help the person who was robbed and wounded - although obviously we should. The point of the story was how "righteous", "religious", "trained" people who should know better often fail to act out the gospel, while those people we consider outsiders, outcasts, and strangers, sometimes live out the gospel without hesitation. The message is that we should watch out for the lowly, the dubious, the suspicious in our midst - not because we need to defend ourselves from them but because God is probably already at work within them, in their midst, in our midst. Perhaps even people in like shepherds.

I'm reminded of Dorothy Day, an American journalist, social activist, and Roman Catholic - someone also considered by some to be an anarchist - someone also considered

² Ibid., pg 39.

by many to be the good samaritan incarnate. In the 1930's, Day, along with Peter Maurin established the "Catholic Worker Movement", a non-violent pacifist movement that provided care for the poor and homeless.

There is a story about Robert Coles going to interview Dorothy Day in 1952. I quote, "Upon entering her 'house of hospitality' [Coles] found [Day] talking with a woman who was obviously very drunk. Eventually Dorothy got up and came over to Coles: 'Are you waiting to speak to one of us?' The troubled, intoxicated woman was not the other, the outsider, 'one of them'; she was not an object of Dorothy Day's charity. Rather, Day was one with this woman in the charity of Christ."³ For Day, what we would call the "outcast" - in this case the drunk woman - was not an object for pity, or an object to be used for an object lesson. She was not an "object" at all. The drunk woman was not a "client". The drunk woman was not a charity case. The drunk woman was a child of God. No more. No less.

These stories always sound so simple. But of course, the real trick is to actually live out this vision. I think that deep down we all know that creating the kingdom of God on earth requires action, not just words. Words are important too of course. But how many of us have ever become more fit because we talked about exercising? How many of us have ever lost weight because we talked about going on a diet. How many of us ever saw new sights and new places because we talked about going on a trip?

The kingdom of God is right outside our own door. We only have to walk out the door and engage with others. Perhaps those "others" will smell like shepherds. Perhaps those "others" will seem as dumb as sheep. It doesn't matter. Because whoever you engage with is a child of God.

So who will we embrace this week? What "outsider" will we welcome - not as a case - but as a child of God? Who can we find this week who needs us to act as Christ for them? Who can we find this week who needs to act as Christ for us? Who will we find? Who will you find?

Amen.

³ http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=76734424348