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Bridge Street United Church
April 21, 2024
Readings: I John 3:16-24; Psalm 27; John10:11-18

Of Sheep and a Shepherd

I have been in a lot of different church buildings over the years. Being a guest preacher with some frequency when I was teaching in the Theology programme at Queen's, or working in the United Church's national office, attending church meetings, and having a personal interest in older buildings, including older churches—all those things have meant I have been inside an unusually large number of churches over my lifetime. I think I can safely say that the most common image I have seen—especially in stained glass windows but also in pictures and various hangings made of many different materials—the most common image I have seen is Jesus portrayed as a shepherd and holding a lamb. Often there are sheep in the picture also.

It is such a common image! And probably that is not surprising. After all, in the brief description in this week's newsletter about the subject of today's sermon, I noted, accurately, that references to sheep and shepherds abound in both the Old and the New Testaments. And some of those images in Scripture are either to God, or to Jesus, as the good shepherd and we human beings as the sheep. I want to talk about three different aspects of this passage about sheep and shepherd, in this case all three related to the notion of Jesus as shepherd and us as the sheep.

The first aspect I would note is that of the great care of the shepherd for the sheep. That care is present throughout this passage. There is the emphasis of a tender care, the shepherd who knows the sheep so well that the sheep know the shepherd's voice and will listen to, or follow,

the shepherd. But perhaps the epitome of that care and love is that the shepherd, Jesus in this case, is willing to risk his life to protect the sheep, to lay down his life for his sheep.

When we hear these verses about Jesus, as shepherd, showing great care for the sheep, I think it is safe to say that for Jesus' original followers, these images reminded them of Scriptural images from their tradition, images found in what we Christians refer to as the Old Testament. The 23rd Psalm comes to our mind, as it would have come to theirs, of the good Shepherd who leads the sheep before still waters, in other words, a source of water sufficiently quiet or gently flowing, who brings the sheep to green pastures and has them lie there, who is with them as a strong and comforting presence in the face of danger. But Jesus' original followers might also have recalled other passages of Scripture, including Ezekiel, chapter 34, in which the God is portrayed as the Good Shepherd: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak" [Ezekiel 34:15-16].

This passage from John, chapter 10, like those Old Testament passages, speaks of one who know us, who cares for us, indeed one who is willing to die for us. It is a passage displaying deep care and deep love, a comforting care that can be especially important to us in times of trouble where we confront some major challenge, and not least among those challenges, when we experience the death of someone close to us.

Today's reading begins with the begins with Jesus' claim, "I am the good shepherd." A better translation here might be "I am the model shepherd." When we hear "good" as in the "good shepherd," our instinct is to contrast "good" with "bad." And there are certainly passages in the Old Testament where God claims to be the Good Shepherd and the contrast is with religious or political leaders who have failed in their duties to the people of Israel, who have in some way or other have led the people of Israel astray. But here the language is of the model

shepherd, the one who exhibits the best qualities possible. I think we again hear language that brings to mind passages such as Psalm 23.

But there are two other concepts in this passage about which I want to speak. One is the concept of the hired hand. It is possible that the concept of the hired hand refers to bad leaders in that good versus bad contrast I was noting earlier. I do not think that is what is going on in the reference in this passage to Jesus as the good shepherd. Rather, I think the reference here to the hired hand is to those who abandon their responsibilities in the face of danger or trouble. It is not to those who lead people astray but to those, unlike Jesus, who do not care sufficiently. I think the contrast here is less with other figures, as we see in some Old Testament passages, and more with the way in which Jesus is, for us, that model shepherd, a model we might follow as we exercise leadership, but perhaps even more in this passage, the one to whom we can look, and upon whom we can rely, in times of trouble.

The other concept in this passage is this reference to other sheep who do not belong to this fold. To quote verse 16, where we find this reference: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” So, what does this reference to “other sheep” mean, along with the related point about there being one flock and one shepherd? In its initial context, I suspect it meant that the Christian church would include Gentiles, or non-Jews, as well as Jews. That matter can seem strange to us as something about which there would be any question. But the idea that the church would expand to include Gentiles, or non-Jews, was something about which the Christian church had major conflict, especially in the first generation after Jesus’ death. Remember, Jesus and all his initial followers were Jewish. And that battle within the early Christian church may have carried on a dispute already existing within Judaism as to whether God’s care extended to non-Jews. That battle within Judaism had gone on for at least several centuries before the birth of

Christ. The book of Jonah, a relatively later book in the Old Testament, reflected that dispute, and the clear answer of the book was that God did care for both Jews and non-Jews. Indeed, Jonah was a book that encouraged some Jews to reach out in missionary activity to non-Jews.

I think that question about whether Gentiles could also be part of the Christian church may have been the question behind these references to other sheep not of this fold but that in the future there would be one flock and one shepherd. That said, in the Protestant, and certainly the United Church, tradition, we believe that the Bible conveys a living word, a contemporary word, that speaks anew in each generation, in every different time and context. For much of the period from the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century until Vatican II, about 60 years ago, a passage such as this one could well have been interpreted as a criticism of the tendency of both Roman Catholics and Protestants to see the other as not part of the flock, not really Christian. I think if I were preaching this sermon in, say, the 1950s, I might well have used using this passage to criticize that very tendency. Vatican II in the 1960s dramatically changed that situation and has led to much closer relationships than what had existed before between the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations. No longer do we see one another as “outside the pale,” or as somehow lesser.

But in 2024, there are other Christians with whom many of us in our denomination find it hard to identify as belonging to the same religious tradition we do, and the reverse would be true for members of some other denominations. I think of the way we sometimes use the terms “conservative,” “liberal,” “evangelical,” “social activist,” “fundamentalist.” Many of us tend to use such terms in disparaging references to certain other Christians. We may well have differences of opinion, indeed strong differences of opinion, with other Christians. That is not problematic. But when we see those other Christians as somehow not Christian, or somehow lesser, then we have a problem.

Let me share a story. In 1981, while I was living in Dallas, Texas, and working on my doctoral degree, President Reagan's first administration made a decision to expand the nuclear arsenal of the United States. That expansion included going ahead with the development of a neutron bomb. A neutron bomb causes less physical destruction but it is more lethal than other nuclear weapons of the day by virtue of the amount of radiation released. A wide-ranging group of American church leaders, all the way from leading Roman Catholic bishops of the day to the evangelist Billy Graham, criticized the expansion of the country's nuclear arsenal and the development of the neutron bomb. It was a remarkably wide spectrum of Christian leaders. They argued that nuclear weapons represented a great threat to the human race and that their continued production, and enhancement, ran contrary to Christian principles.

At that time, all American nuclear weapons were produced at the Pantex plant in Amarillo, Texas. In that same year, the then Roman Catholic bishop of the Diocese of Amarillo, Leroy Mattiesen, publicly encouraged Roman Catholics working at the Pantex plant, as a matter of conscience, to consider resigning and finding work elsewhere, rather than continuing to work on building nuclear weapons. In doing so, he reflected many of the same broad thoughts and concerns that other church leaders were raising. In response to Bishop Mattiesen's public letter, the pastor of a large Southern Baptist church in Amarillo preached a sermon in which he declared that, contrary to Bishop Mattiesen and others who were critical of the expansion of the American nuclear arsenal, he believed that nuclear weapons were the means God would use, in God's good time, to bring about the end of the world as we knew it. In other words, these weapons were blessed things, and they would be the means God would use to usher in eternity.

Now I hope you can guess with which of these two church leaders I found myself agreeing. But, despite my total disagreement with this Southern Baptist pastor in terms of how we understood God's will, I needed, and I still need, to remember that he is my brother in Christ.

He makes the same confession of Jesus as Lord that I do, strongly disagree though we would on many other matters.

That common confession or common faith imposes upon us an ethic of love, a very tough ethic of love. It demands a love and a respect for others, even for those who see the faith tradition differently from ourselves, perhaps especially those who see the faith differently from the way we do. It is in such times and disagreements that we are in danger of forgetting that those with whom we disagree are among those “other sheep,” that they, like us, are part of that one flock that looks to one shepherd.

Today, and in the days ahead, may we lean into this passage about the Good Shepherd for the strength we need to face the hard challenges some days bring. But even as we do so, may we remember that we are part of one flock, not the whole flock, and may we learn to be gentle and gracious with the other sheep who listen, as do we, for the voice of the Shepherd. And to the God who made us, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

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