

“Sheepish”
8th Sunday after Pentecost - 7.18.21 - Mark 6:30-34, 53-56/B

It might be dangerous to let a preacher take 5 Sundays out of the pulpit - especially when said preacher will spend it on the north shore of Lake Superior (just a stone's throw from Canada.) There, in the woods that run down the hills to the waters of the Big Lake, a preacher feels small - humbled in the face of the amazing Creation. And once humbled, she might start to listen to what God is saying in a new way. Then, she just might come and share some of those musings with you. So, as always, I pray with the Psalmist, *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.*

Grace and Peace to you from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I feel as if my retreat from leadership has resulted in “a new beginning,” so I’d like to invite you into a bit of a “reboot” using the back of your bulletin (available on Facebook page and the weekly email update, if you want to re-read.) The reflection begins: “The people were expecting a powerful king. In Jesus, they were given a shepherd. They were looking for the one who would conquer the empire with military might. In Jesus, they were shown the way of self-sacrifice. They were used to a kingdom that celebrated the wealthy and influential. In Jesus, they became witnesses to a kingdom that places the marginalized at the center.” (Now I imagine you are pretty used to that kind of comparison between what folks expected and what they got in Jesus. Read on...)

“Jesus takes what we think we know about status, belonging and leadership and turns it on its head, shepherding us into a new way of living.” (Uh oh, are you afraid that I am going to talk about the “Follow Me” part? Well, yes - for that is our new beginning.)

As Jesus went ashore he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. Mk 6: 34. The Good News today is that we are all - the shepherds Jesus has chosen. The Bad News is that we are all - the shepherds Jesus has chosen. To mix my metaphor - for those of us who have felt like we are somehow **not** on the hook for sharing God’s love with the world - and I include myself in this group - I’m here to tell you that you were never really **on the hook**, unless you take God seriously...

In the Old Testament, good kings - the leaders of that time - were likened to shepherds, and shepherds were expected to act for the well-being of the sheep - to protect and find food for their flocks, to keep peace among animals, defend against attackers, to search for strays, and rescue those who were in danger. But the kings were scattering their sheep and paying no attention to providing for their welfare. So, the prophet Jeremiah is truth-telling to the power of the kings - kings who were descendants of the Ultimate King in Israel’s history, King David. And Israel had experienced kings of all kinds, from the heights of goodness to the depths of depravity. We, too, know that even good leaders can go bad; be corrupted, turn in on themselves, with tragic consequences. Therefore, calling a king a “good shepherd” was the highest of praise.

But by the time of Jesus, shepherds were not valued, but thought of as the least of the population: poor, disrespected, unable to testify in court because no one could believe them. (Ironically, that reputation preceded them to the point where they may have just had to swallow their pride to try to scratch out an honest wage doing the job that no one else wanted. Sound familiar?) No one looked to a shepherd to be a model of good citizenship. No

one looked to a woman to offer anything of value save childbearing, and the jury had been out on Gentiles for generations. Yet Paul's letter to the Christians at Ephesus (2nd lesson) reminds us that God chose to join the Jews and the Gentiles together "to grow into a holy temple to the Lord...built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

God values every human life - and that is why Jesus' life and ministry were so radical, so counter-cultural. These people who had little or no value to "the world," were the very folks he sought! Jesus spoke truth not only to the powerful, but to the power-less as well; and has called us to do the same, to watch and learn from him.

In today's Gospel, the apostles have returned from their first mission trip, with the power to heal. They have such stories to tell! But folks have come to hear and see Jesus - the crowds are growing and there is no time for fellowship or debriefing - much less time for rest and a meal. Even when Jesus tries to take them away to rest, the need is too great. Jesus looks over the gathering crowd "and has compassion for them - because they were like sheep without a shepherd." So, putting his own needs aside, Jesus tends to his flock - before himself - before (even) his own family of disciples. There is a new beginning here, my friends, where Jesus teaches by his own example and shows us how to be a Good Shepherd like he is.

Sometimes it is hard to start over, but as a faith community we have an opportunity right now to pray and discern where we might need a new look. For example, I have heard folks say that they feel like the church is no longer the church they grew up in - that somehow, the decisions around our work for justice and value for every human being has nothing to do with faith and is not what we should be about. "The Church has gotten too liberal, too political!" I hear you say, and honestly, sometimes I would agree with you, I really would. However. If you are a stranger in a strange land; if you are being abused by your spouse; if you have been discriminated against or felt the sting of racist sentiments, you don't care about how political the church is, you just want someone to stand with you and help you seek justice. Thankfully, what holds us together is not our agreement on issues, but our relationship to God through Jesus. Because Jesus Christ always stands with the oppressed, the poor, the undervalued in this world - and the Body of Christ, his Church, is chosen to do the same. So, it's back to the beginning for us, children of God. Now, what?

OT Lesson is pretty sharp: "*if you don't take care of the sheep, you will be replaced...*" Can you even imagine God walking in here and wondering where are the ones who are "missing" - the ones we should be concerned about and searching for? I don't mean those who have chosen to leave the church, but those who might not be welcome here: asylum seekers, indigenous peoples, widows, orphans, single parents; gender undesignated; abused partners, black and brown people, aliens and convicted felons, college age and young professionals.

If you fit into any of those categories, "thank you" for giving us a chance; for sticking with us as we open ourselves up to try loving as God loves - regardless of behaviors or choices or politics or poverty. If that doesn't matter for God's gracious invitation to the Kingdom, why in the world should it matter so much to us? Jesus' followers were chosen from the rabble and the lowly: an unwed mother; an addict; a day laborer; a tax collector; a handful of fishermen; and some whose stories line up much more closely with those we reject than those we would invite into our homes.

What we do matters... our hearts show our faith, and it's not a private affair. We see the 12+ and their belief and obedience to God. And make no mistake...these followers were

not as lame as we might like to think. They KNEW who they were following. They KNEW they were being watched, and judged, and they feared, but still they tried, with the help of God, to have compassion on everyone and to follow the calling of their shepherd.

I'm sure you heard the news a while back of the finding of remains of indigenous children at residential schools set up by churches in both Canada and the US. When a recent burial was uncovered, there was a post on Facebook with six words from an unknown source that went straight to my soul. It read, "A tiny whisper: "They found us.""

You are called to shepherd the sheep, to guide, protect, nourish and companion them...to look for the lost until they are found, to answer the calling of the One who honors us with not only his personal invitation to Supper, but the honor of shepherding his own flock. May we never tire of following, learning, and being humbled in the service of Our Lord, Jesus, the Son of the Living God. Amen.

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Resources: Whitney Gould (We'koqma'a) illustrated "...and a small voice whispers, "They found us.""