Fourth Sunday after Easter 2017

I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for my sheep.
Our faith is true when we do the same

The Good Shepherd

This is such a comforting parable, the Good Shepherd. It evokes memories of paintings of a gentle shepherd holding a gentle lamb. But in reality, herding sheep is a tough business. I experienced being a sheepherder on a spirituality farm some years back. I was trying to get a small herd of sheep from one pasture to another, but they didn't seem to be getting the hang of it. They kept wandering off into other directions. And the ram, Boss, would periodically challenge me. That gave me a good idea of how difficult the job of a good sheep herder is.

A good shepherd is one who cares for the sheep, who doesn't blame the sheep for getting lost but who goes after them to save them. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. There is never an instance in the Gospel when Jesus ever scolded a sinner. So why do we think he will scold and punish us sheep now? This wasn't in his job description. Jesus doesn't save us "*from our sins,*" he saves us "*through our sins;*" we sheep aren't found until "*after*" we have been lost. This changes everything about the nature of our relationship with God. It moves us from fear to trust, from despair to hope, from alienation to love, which is why he is called the Good Shepherd.

The Bad Shepherd

Mercy, compassion and forgiveness are the qualities of a good shepherd. What are the negative characteristics of a bad shepherd?

The Zealot. Bad shepherds are typically zealots who hate evil, including the evil do-ers. They are actually relieved by having someone to hate, because it takes away their inner shame and anxiety and provides a false sense of innocence. As long as the evil is "over there" and they can keep their focus on changing or expelling someone else, they feel at peace. They speak with aggression and intolerance, often seeking to destroy what they hate, providing them "*a false sense of innocence.*" We see this a lot in our country - the compulsion of having to be right. By contrast, a good shepherd seeks the innocence of the wrong-doers by loving them.

The Victim. Bad shepherds play the victim as a way to deal with pain indirectly. They will blame someone else, and their pain becomes their personal ticket to power because it gives them a false sense of moral superiority and outrage. They don't have to grow up, let go, forgive, or surrender—they just have to accuse someone else of being worse than they are. That becomes a fragile identity, which always needs more reinforcement. Whenever we assume a position of moral superiority over another, we are no longer in the presence of God. We see this a lot in our country. Everything bad that happens to us is always somebody else's fault. By contrast, a good shepherd takes joy in lifting others up to a higher moral level.

The Avoider . Bad shepherds avoid the path of transformation through flight or denial. They will often deny or ignore pain by naively dividing the world up through purity codes and worthiness systems. They keep the problem on the level of words, ideas, and absolute laws separating good and evil. They refuse to live in the real world of shadow and paradox. They divide the world into total good guys and complete bad guys, a comfortable but untrue worldview of black and white. This comprises most fundamentalism and early stage religion. It refuses to carry the cross of imperfection, failure, and sin in itself. It is always "*others who must be excluded so I can be pure and holy.*" Denial is an understandable—but false—way of coping and surviving. We see this a lot in our country. It refuses to look back at our past to review the morality of our actions; it simply will not look back to see if it was wrong. By contrast, a good shepherd carries the pain of others, bringing them healing and peace.

Actually we all exhibit these negatives at times in our lives, don't we. It's just that our concern be that they not become our primary and obsessive way of acting.

What triggers negative behaviors?

Negative patterns of behavior are often triggered by intense emotional issues. I offer three examples. First, the Republican's repealing of the "Affordable. Care Act" last week. Now I want you all to relax because this is not about politics, this is about us. The primary concern of a bad shepherd about that vote would be "w*ho won, who lost?*" The primary concern of a good shepherd would be "*how will this vote affect the people*?"

Another intense emotional issue is the debate over gun control. The primary concern of a bad shepherd to this issue would be "*will I be able to keep my gun*?" The primary concern of a good shepherd would be "*what best protects the safety of the people*?"

Intense emotions surround the tragedy of abortion. The primary response of a bad shepherd to this issue would be "*hate (the zealot) or blame (the victim) or avoidance (denial), often speaking as if the tragedy of abortion were the only moral issue on the planet.*" The primary concern of a good shepherd would be "*to seek to protect life of the unborn, and the newly born, and the mother, and the father, and the homeless, and the sick, and the criminal, and the alien.*"

The Good Shepherd

The cross of Christ shows us the qualities of a good shepherd. Jesus embraced the depths of suffering, and at the same time forgave reality for being what it was. He didn't condemn those who were killing him, he forgave them. He doesn't condemn us when we sheep get lost, he seeks us out and brings us back to the flock - to each other, which is why he is the Good Shepherd of us all and shows us how we are to be good shepherds to each other.

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