

## ***Sermon***

### ***The Sheepfold***

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Our gospel from John is for most of us a familiar text where Jesus takes on the role of Shepherd. Sometimes when we read a text like this one, we come with certain expectations or even conclusions of how this might apply to our own lives. It is clear to see that Jesus is our shepherd, there to gather us together and more importantly to protect us from things that will hurt us, as a real shepherd does. Now sheep are not aggressive animals, they are quite docile and I hate to say a bit dumb. They rely entirely on the shepherd to gather them, lead them and find them should they become lost. So if you have related to the sheep in this story, perhaps it's time to rethink that just a bit.

The Romans were in full scale at this time and the vast majority, 70-80%, lived in poverty, food insecurity. This would be a welcome story for them at that time. They were oppressed, disenfranchised, hungry and tired. This message that a shepherd would literally lay down his life for the flock sounds very welcome to a people suffering.

This image that Jesus is the ultimate good shepherd who brings abundant life is further supported by his actions of healing and providing wine and bread. The presentation of Jesus offers a critique of the Roman Empire, which claimed to bring wholeness and wellbeing to society when its structures actually brought sickness and poverty to most of its subjects. Yet with Jesus, the power role is

reversed. Rather than power through military might, Jesus absorbs the violence on behalf of the people.

Our scripture from Acts gives us an image of a Christ community that seems to serve alongside the vision created by Christ in the Gospel. It is one of equality and diversity. One that shares resources among all people to ensure the betterment and strength of the flock, if you will. If a shepherd were to favor only some of their sheep – the ones that perhaps produce a fleece that brings a better price or one that just looks more appealing, and allowed the rest of the flock to suffer with less food, less nutritious food, less comfortable places to sleep or no place to sleep at all, how would this benefit the flock? While each of the sheep may have different fleece, some may be even of varied colors, at the end of the day all the fleece will keep you warm when woven into a sweater or a pair of socks. If part of the flock is left hungry, they will likely become sick and be a burden to the shepherd who must now deal with the consequences of hoarding resources for only a few.

Our scripture from Acts describes how the community handles their property: “they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Luke’s vision is of a Christ community where all members have their basic needs met; where there will be enough food for all and the basic needs of life will be available for all. The community of believers remains in Jerusalem, worshiping in the Temple, then returning home to share meals with one another. Joy and gladness mark their days...their abundant joy is contagious and others continually join their fellowship. And this is our genealogy

– this is where we all began. In this community of believers who shared with one another and gave what they had so that all may have their needs met. However, like the stories in Genesis, where the goodness given by God does not last, soon this ideal community is marred by sin, in this case greed, power and prejudice. Fighting amongst the factions of people – the Aramaic speaking members complaining that the Greek speaking people were given more food, fighting ensues.

It is easy to critique the Romans and these early believers who lost their vision of a Christlike kingdom by giving into our human weakness of “it’s not fair” all those years ago, but perhaps it is not so different than what we experience today.

Where do we participate in systems that oppress others today?

Where do we grapple and grasp for power?

Are we challenging the systems even when it will cost us something?

Are we following the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls us to critique these systems and follow the path to abundant life?

Abundant life...for all. It is not an easy choice but for Ila and for my grandkids and yours, we can! Before the brokenness of human life swoops down upon the fledgling Christian community we read about today, there is a glimpse of the new creation; a glimpse of the new birth given through the teachings of Christ. These

glimmers of the reign of God seem so far off today, but they are as near as our worship, prayer and fellowship can take us.

Are we following the Good Shepherd?

Amen