

EASTER FOUR, YEAR B, APRIL 25, 2021

Pictures of Jesus as the Good Shepherd are probably the most iconic image we have of Jesus. Many churches have stained glass windows of Jesus depicted as the Good Shepherd with an adorable lamb draped around his shoulders or they have some kind of reproduction painting with that same scene. All of these images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd are very pastoral, even to the point of being saccharine. We've turned this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd into a Hallmark greeting card. Truth is this sanitized image is probably as far removed as the shepherd metaphor Jesus was using as you can get. This romanticized image is beautiful, but it doesn't really relate to the message that Jesus was conveying about what it means to be a good shepherd.

For a 1st century shepherd, it was a grueling, dirty and menial job. For a nomadic shepherd to truly care for his sheep he lived, ate and slept with the sheep and almost become one like them. He did this so that he could tell his sheep apart and know their uniqueness just as they knew the shepherd's voice. The job required leading the flock to pasture, seeking strays before they fell victim to predators, and accounting for the well-being of the whole flock to the owner at the appointed time. The law said that if a shepherd lost any of the sheep to wolves, thieves, or carelessness, the shepherd was personally responsible for replacing that which was lost. This meant that shepherds, in addition to everything else, were also expected to risk their lives for the safety of their flock.

It was no wonder really good shepherds were in short supply in Palestine. It was not an easy job, nor was it a job that many sought after. Shepherds were constantly dirty and smelly and considered to be at the bottom of the social scale. So how did we get to a manicured Jesus cuddling a lily-white lamb from the mud-stained grueling, hardships of shepherding?

For the 1st century listeners, they knew what the job of a shepherd was. They knew shepherding was not a glamorous job or one that many sought after. So, when Jesus uses the image of the good shepherd for himself, he is saying something provocative rather than producing a warm, fuzzy image. So, what was Jesus really saying? First, the Greek term used for good should really be translated as honorable or morally just or noble. When Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd he is stating that God's presence and his actually dwells in the wilderness, out among the wolves, the thieves, the hirelings, and the smelly sheep; in other words, among the outcasts, the irreligious, the ritually unclean, and the politically incorrect. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus lives at the edges of polite society, out in the wild, untamed places of the world. His life remains perpetually in danger in order to protect all of his sheep. By identifying himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus is telling the religious establishment that God cares for those they don't want to have anything to do with. He is the morally just shepherd.

When Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold" he is really getting to the heart of what being the Good Shepherd is all about. Jesus is making it clear that in God's kingdom, the normal boundaries of acceptable people that society has constructed no longer applies. He demonstrates this throughout the gospels by his choice of disciples; by his public conversations with women, some of them known to have a sinful reputation, even women of foreign origins; by his contact with lepers and the blind; by inviting children to take part in public gatherings. In this passage John is claiming that

outside their community, outside their sheepfold, are other sheep that belong to the Good Shepherd despite the exclusive boundaries they try to erect to keep others out.

Fast forward to today and this text invites us to consider who are the “other sheep” in today’s world? Not only who are they are but how are we supposed to react and interact with them. When Jesus says, “my own know me” he is telling us that if we claim to be his follower then we need to look beyond our comfort zones and embrace those that society continually casts out. We need to figure out how we can begin relationships with each other so we become more inclusive of the varied differences that want to tear us apart.

Let’s face it, exclusiveness is seductive. There are plenty of people broadcasting messages of hate and fear of other people of different races, culture, religion, etc. It is done to create barriers of misunderstanding, false stereotypes and sow seeds of mistrust and suspicion. When exclusivity rises to the surface, it is time to take a look at where it comes from and how we can best react. A recent poll said 54% of American’s believe that the biggest threat to our way of life are others!! What others? Who are these others? Aren’t we all children of God?

As followers of Jesus, we need to be ready to examine our own attitudes and motivations. Is our own belief system which is, obviously, informed by our gender, race, culture and religion so insecure that it is threatened by others outside of our own like looking and thinking group? How can we learn about the pain that other races and cultures deal with on a constant basis if we have already made up our minds about them? How do we live into the love, grace, and mercy of Christ if we refuse to examine our own stereotypes that exclude others? How do we acknowledge that we are all God’s children?

As someone once said, the body of Christ is not a metaphor. We, the Christian community, are truly the hands, feet, face, and voice of Christ in the world. As the ones bringing the message of the Good Shepherd for all to hear, we are responsible for lifting up his message of love, care, mercy, and inclusion. We are not called to make all of the sheep the same color, or walk the same way, or even make the same sounds. Our task is to welcome and provide for the needs and protection of all of God’s flock. Often that means doing what we can to make available such things as food, clothing, shelter, medicine, comfort, support, but most of all hope of being one with each other.

The approach Jesus models is one of openness, face-to-face communication, and acceptance of the person in spite of his/her labels or race or religion or sexuality, or culture or family situation. Rather than withdraw from the “other sheep,” he seeks them out. Instead of fearing those unlike himself, he offers them grace, mercy, and love.

I’ve been watching the National Geographic series called, “Secrets of the Whales”. They are extremely intelligent and social animals. Within the pods of whales, young ones are taught their specific language unique to their species and how to hunt and play and interact. What I found fascinating is that even within their own particular species the whales have different languages. So, Orca whales in New Zealand have a different language than the Orca’s in Norway. They even hunt differently and for different food.

But what was captured for the first time was an interesting encounter between beluga whales and a lone narwal whale. A young male narwal whale had become lost from his pod and couldn’t find his way back to them. He literally was lost in uncharted territories that he never had ventured into before and the scientists that followed him wondered if he would survive on his own. Then he happened upon a group of young male beluga males and he began to swim with them. They appeared to accept him but

not speaking their whale language or hunting the same food, the scientists wondered what would happen.

The following year when the group of scientists caught up with this pod of beluga whales, they found the narwal whale was still with them. He had been accepted by them and had become one of them. This is a great example of what we should be doing.

As Christians, we should embrace the motto of "I'd rather be excluded for who I include than be included for who I exclude." We make a choice every day. Will we stick to our own kind and create a place where we feel safe and secure, free from any risk? Or, will we be the welcoming face, the open hands, the purposeful feet, and the compassionate voice of Christ in the world so that all may know the love of God?

If we say we follow our morally just shepherd, I don't think we can do any less. Amen.