

19 Feb 2023 - Jn 10.7-18 / "The Good Shepherd" (North Star MC, Installation of Lisa MB as Pastoral Leader)

§1 Good morning, North Star MC. I'm thankful to gather with you once again to worship our God together.

I'm here not just to worship with you today but also to bring a blessing from our whole MC Sask family of congregations as you celebrate Lisa becoming your pastoral leader.

My privilege and pleasure as MC Sask's Church Engagement Minister has been to be an embodied reminder of how we are knit together in one family and into the one body of Jesus. As I travel from Zion MC in Swift Current to Forest Church, which gathers on the first Sunday afternoon of each month at Shekinah, I get to show up as a reminder that who we are in Jesus means much more than just those of us gathered in this or that particular sanctuary on a Sunday morning. Lisa actually got a taste of this role last week while she was representing MC Sask on our behalf at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary's Pastors and Leaders Week in Elkhart, Indiana. She brought our stories and questions and hopes there and lived out our connection to sisters and brothers far beyond our local communities. I hope that's what I do on Sundays like today as I worship with you. It is good to be with you.

I also want to help us remember that the relationships that run through our gatherings are not just to our Mennonite or our Christian sisters and brothers. Right here, in this place where we gather, the Spirit of God, the land that supports us, the air that flows between us weaves us into relationship and responsibility to our neighbors—settlers, newcomers, and Indigenous peoples. All together we raise our offerings to God—justice, peace, compassion and joy—held all together in the goodness of God's steady, tender mercy.

In the name of this good God, who holds us in tenderness like a mom or a dad cradling their child, that I greet you this morning. I greet you in the name of Jesus, the shepherd who cares for all the troubled, scattered, and tired. I greet you in the name of the Spirit of all comfort and compassion. I greet you with the joy of your sisters and brothers in Mennonite Church Saskatchewan as we all rejoice in knowing and being known by the God who loves us to the point of laying down God's very self to lead us into abundant life.

This is what I hope to remind you of this morning, church.

First, though, I ask you to grow quiet as I speak with God in prayer.

Prayer

O God, you spoke your word
and revealed your good news in Jesus, your Messiah.
Fill all creation with that word again,
so that by proclaiming your joyful promises to all nations
and singing of your glorious hope to all peoples,
we may become one living body,

witness of your presence healing all creation. Amen.

§2 Jesus says, "*I am the good shepherd.*"

In my mind, I can't help but hear two hymns: "Savior, like a shepherd, lead us, much we need thy tender care," and "Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us, for we need you to help us find our way."

I hear Jesus say he is the good shepherd, and it reminds me of all those places in my life and in the lives of those I love where I need him to come and, like a shepherd, lift our lost, weary, cold, hurting hearts, place us on his shoulders, and carry us close.

In the story leading up to the passage we heard read this morning, that is just what Jesus does. In Jn ch 9, Jesus is walking the side streets and back alleys of Jerusalem, trying to avoid authorities who want him done away with. He sees a man there, blind from birth. Jesus pushes through the interrogations and hesitations of those standing around. He reaches out to the man, touches his eyes, cleanses him and heals him.

I'm not sure I need to stress how sight is not only a gift but a lifeline. Especially in the ancient economy of Palestine, without sight you were at the mercy of the charity of others—maybe family (though this man's parents don't seem to care too much for him later in the story), maybe goodhearted neighbors, maybe not. When Jesus calls him and touches his eyes, he shares with him not only sight (the light of the world!) but also life—full life, abundant life.

Jesus is the shepherd who cares for each scattered, injured sheep. I remember the words of God spoken by the prophet Ezekiel. God says, "*I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick*" (34.16). Jesus is that good shepherd, the gentle healer, the one who seeks, saves, nurses back to full health.

Lisa, as I'm preaching to the whole church today, I'm also speaking to you in particular. The word *pastor* is one English translation of the Greek term (and in Hebrew, too) that means most literally *shepherd*. As you care for this congregation as their pastoral leader, you are being called to that same work Jesus does: tending the hurt, seeking the strays and the left behind, laying down privilege and comfort to care for the people near and far whom God loves.

§3 The story in ch 9, however, doesn't end tidily with sight for the blind. You see, Jesus isn't the only person trying to mind the flock in this story. There are others who think it's their prerogative to lead the sheep.

The man with new sight runs into some Pharisees. A lot could be said about the Pharisees—and by no means is all of it bad. But here, in this encounter, there's not much good. All the Pharisees can see is that this man was healed without their approval. The Pharisees thought they were the true shepherds of the people, knowing what's best for everyone. But here this Jesus guy had sneaked into their territory—their sheepfold—and was disturbing their flock.

When the man who can now see hears the Pharisees' accusing questions, he sticks up for Jesus. He says, "Whether Jesus is a rulebreaker, I can't say. But what I do know is that I was blind, but now I can see" (9.25). The Pharisees respond by cursing the man and kicking him out of their community. They decide to cull the herd.

I always value what Bible teacher Craig Keener has to say about the Gospels. Here he points out that for 1st-century Jews, Jesus' discussion of sheep, a shepherd, a sheepfold wouldn't have been much of a puzzle or riddle. Today, two thousand years later, we piece together Jesus' parables and *figures of speech*, searching for what he's pointing to. But for his original audience, talking about a shepherd pretty clearly meant one of two things.

"Shepherd," number one, was a common way of talking about a king or a leader. In the biblical story, David was a shepherd, Moses was a shepherd.

Even more frequently, number two, *the* shepherd was God. We hear Ps 80, v 1:

*Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth!;*

Ps 95(.6-7):

*Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before YHWH our Maker;
for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care;*

and, famously, Ps 23(.1):

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

This list could go on. Usually, these two ideas were related. A good ruler would be one shepherding the people on God's behalf.

It would have been crystal clear that when Jesus claims to be the "good shepherd," he was claiming to care for the flock like God does. And the flock, the sheepfold? *We are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care*. Equally plainly, the sheep were God's people; the sheepfold, the community of Israel—the very same community from which these would-be God-ordained leaders, the Pharisees, had cast out the one guy who could truly see.

§4 Lisa, this is where I want to talk to you this morning. But I'm probably also talking to anyone else who feels the weight on their shoulders to tend and guide the church. I'm definitely also speaking to myself.

If we are going to be Jesus' true co-workers and not modern-day descendants of those Jesus calls *thieves* and *wolves* and *hired hands*, we need to learn from the good shepherd, the true shepherd.

First off, we learn that us under-shepherds never have the authority to say who's in and who's out. It's not our job.

Jesus teaches us this with what first strikes me as a cryptic saying: “*I am the gate for the sheep*” (10.7).

Some Bible teachers will connect this to stories about Palestinian shepherds laying down through the night across the entrance to their sheepfold, their very bodies and lives becoming the protection against wolves and other intruders. This may be part of the the story here, and clearly this *is* what Jesus does indeed do for us, laying down his life to make a home for every vulnerable soul in the safety and abundance of God's home.

But with Jesus' words coming right after the Pharisees have *thrown* the man with new sight *out of* the community, I hear something more. When Jesus says, “I am the gate,” he's telling the would-be shepherds of God's people that God doesn't need gatekeepers. Jesus has the work of minding the door handled. In fact, he is the only way in our out. And it seems that Jesus is happy to welcome in any and all, whoseever will look to him for safety, for healing, for new sight, for abundant joy.

It turns out that the Pharisees (and, honestly, folks like me who are sometimes prone to join them)—*when* the Pharisees took it upon themselves to mind the door, to keep out of sight and out of mind folks whose suffering was hard to explain, folks who are prone to make a scene, folks who just don't understand how we do things here (just like they did with the man who can now see)—*when* they tried control the gate, they themselves became *thieves* and *robbers*. Thieves and robbers take sheep out of the fold of God's community; as impostor gatekeepers, they did just that.

For folks who call ourselves pastors and pastoral leaders and church leaders, it's easy to think that patrolling the boundaries is the same thing as keeping the church safe. “If we can get just the right folks in and keep the troublemakers away, everything will be just fine.” But the safety, the well being, the abundant life of the people of God doesn't depend on you and me. It depends only on Jesus: he is the way in and the way out to good pasture, quiet waters.

§5 Jesus teaches us another lesson here and, frankly, a more important one.

Jesus says that what makes him a *good* shepherd is that he lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus could clearly see where his conflict with the Pharisees, with the Temple leaders, and with the Roman rulers was headed. He knew where this was going to get him. And yet he chooses this path of healing outsiders, of pursuing sheep scattered beyond the sheepfold, of standing up to the wolves and robbers, destroyers and exploiters. Why?

In v 12 he contrasts himself to those he calls “hired hands”—people in it only for the money and side benefits. (Elsewhere Jesus talks about how these Pharisees as well as the scribal authorities loved the honor and respect folks would show them because of their position or

reputation.) Jesus says that when such professionals and officeholders see hurt coming, they run *because they do not care about the sheep*.

This is the difference. Jesus is the good shepherd—good to the point that he puts his life on the line for us—because he *cares* for us. Earlier, v3, Jesus says the good shepherd knows and leads each sheep of his flock by name. This is an intimate, personal love and care. *He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out, ... and the sheep follow him because they know his voice* (4-5). Jesus comes back to this in v 14: *I am the good shepherd, and I know my own and my own know me*.

This personal love Jesus has for each member of his flock is profoundly deep. Jesus compares it to the deepest, most intimate relationship in the universe—that between Jesus and the God he calls Father. *I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father* (14-15).

But then Jesus shows us something even more wonderful. This tender, caring relationship between Father and Son—one we confess as Trinity, existing for ever and always, with the Holy Spirit, as the truest heart of all reality—what does it look like? This relationship is put most grandly on display through Jesus' love and care for us, through his laying down his life for us, the sheep under his care. This is what the God of love looks like. *For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life* (17).

Much later in Jn's Gospel story, after the heartbreaking yet mysterious glory of Good Friday and the shock and wonder of the following Sunday morning, Jesus full of new life walks along the lakeshore with his dear disciple Simon Peter, and asks him three times if Peter loves him. Peter stammers each time, "Of course I do, Lord; you know I love you." Three times Jesus responds, "*Then shepherd my sheep*" (21.15-17).

(It turns out Jesus doesn't need hired gatekeepers, but he does want coworkers in caring for the scattered and hurting children of God.)

Jesus goes on, telling Peter that just as he had laid down his life, Peter would be asked to do the same. Peter would lay down his life for the sheep.

Why? Scripture doesn't offer an answer there in that resurrection conversation on the beach. But Jesus has already told Peter (and us) why a good shepherd lays down his life. It's for love. A good shepherd cares for us. This is what the love of God looks like.

Pastoral ministry, church leadership, it doesn't always or even usually mean martyrdom. (And, to be clear, there's a constant temptation to let the job demand too much, to make sacrifices that God doesn't ask for.) But shepherding the people of God—to be a *good* shepherd—can only grow from a heart of tender compassion and care for the flock. Knowing your people each by name, speaking to their hearts, hurts, hopes, and needs—even when that is awkward or uncomfortable. At times, it will be risky, sleepless nights and sorrow and constant prayer. But also joy, delight, tender community, truly knowing and being known. It's nice work if you can get

it—for all us pastors, pastoral leaders, church chairs, elders and deacons and Sunday School teachers; all of us are called to walk in the way of the true shepherd.

§6 Lisa, North Star MC, I offer you these words of blessing.

Jesus has welcomed us each into his flock. He sought us out when we felt lost, left behind, hungry, homesick, tired, troubled, confused, alone. He picked us up, carried us each home, whispering gently our names and his endless love for us, promising good pasture, safety, abundance. He did this for you and for me. He does this for anyone who asks, anyone looking up to him for help. This is how he loves the world; this is how God loves the world.

He does this because he loves us.

May you know that love, ever more truly. May you trust in that love to be the door, the only gate that matters. And may he who lays down his life for you, enable you to love one another with every degree of tender care, truthful speech, and compassionate understanding.

Amen.