

To Protect and to Serve
[John Chapter 10; Psalm 23]

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I don't know much about sheep....[That's it - I *don't* know much about sheep!] And my knowledge about *shepherds* is equally deficient. Nonetheless, I've always been intrigued by the Biblical image of the shepherd. Maybe it's because I share a name with that young shepherd boy, David, who defends his flock with a slingshot, and later uses it to bring-down a giant! Perhaps it's because one of the first Scripture passages I ever learned was the Twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd...." In any event, I find that the image of a *shepherd* presents a powerful picture of the way in which the Holy One relates to people; and it also reveals something about the way in which the Holy One would have people relate to one another. So, in spite of my lack of rural experience, I want to use this morning's theme of the shepherd to examine - and perhaps, to enhance - our relationship with the Holy One, and with the people around us.

One thing this morning's readings clearly reveal, is that - in Biblical times - there was a unique relationship between a shepherd and his or her flock. The shepherd, unlike a hired hand, has a vested interest in protecting and caring for the sheep. Jesus says that because the sheep are the shepherd's own, the shepherd will *never* abandon or forsake them. Regardless of the threat or danger, a good shepherd stays with the sheep, even if it means risking one's own life. In Jesus, we see a marvelous example of that kind of steadfast commitment. Even though he is constantly attacked and threatened by leaders of the religious establishment, Jesus never wavers in defending his own: the poor, the vulnerable, the outcast, and *even* the "outsider." "I have *other* sheep that do not belong to this fold!" Jesus proclaims. "I

must also bring them in...so there will be One flock, One shepherd.”

Imagine for a moment how Jesus’ words would have angered the religious enthusiasts of his day. His proclamation - that Divine compassion and care extends beyond the borders of their own faith community - would have been extremely disturbing to them; just as it still disturbs many highly religious people today. The affirmation that the Holy One loves *all* people equally - including Muslims and Buddhists, agnostics and atheists - still bothers many Christians. Yet the core message of Jesus Christ, is the of Good News of Divine Love for *all*! And it’s a message that Jesus defends with his own life. In spite of the threats and danger, Jesus refuses to abandon the message or to desert his flock.

As a *Good Shepherd*, Jesus understands that his mission is to bring together and protect the *entire* flock - doing all that he can to insure the flock’s well-being and security. This doesn’t mean that difficulties or dangers won’t arise; but it does mean that in those terrible times of trouble or suffering - even in the face of death itself, you and I are not alone. One unique perspective that Christianity offers to a global understanding of God, is that in the person of Jesus Christ the Holy One is fully present - even in the midst of the worst that Life can bring. Upon the Cross of Christ, the agony of human betrayal and doubt, suffering and death is courageously endured *and transformed*. The affirmation of Easter, is that the Divine Source of Life and Love doesn’t desert Jesus, or *us*! Instead, the Holy Presence remains with us - keeping us ultimately safe and secure. In practical terms, this means that you and I can boldly carry-forward the message and mission of Jesus Christ - in any situation we face. As Christ’s followers, we are empowered and sent-forth as modern-day shepherds: to seek the lost and the wandering; to tend the sick and the hurting; to feed the hungry and compassionately care for all those who are struggling and vulnerable. In other words, we are called to faithfully pursue the path of Jesus Christ.

In the 23rd Psalm, when the author writes about the Holy One leading us “in the paths of *righteousness*” he’s not talking about some kind of holy highway that sets us apart from others. The “righteousness” which the Holy One desires, is that people treat one another in ways that are *right* and fair, good and just. Throughout the Scriptures, the Divine call to *righteousness* includes a clear mandate to lift-up the poor and the oppressed; to care for widows, and orphans, and foreigners; to protect the weak, and to feed and nourish those who hunger and thirst. Like modern-day shepherds, you and I can help provide Life’s basic necessities to others. We do this on a *physical* level, by contributing to our food banks, and by helping prepare and serve our “Hunger Meals”. We support Our Church’s Wider Mission. Cleveland Roots, and other programs that tackle the critical problem of hunger - both locally and throughout the world. Additionally, though, you and I are in a unique position to help provide for one another’s *spiritual* needs and hungers. And while that might sound like a daunting task, it’s actually fairly simple.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus demonstrates a deep commitment to tending to the needs of those around him. Whether it’s a one-on-one situation, or even when he’s surrounded by enormous crowds, Jesus recognizes and responds to people who are lost or struggling, hungering or hurting. He takes the time to comfort and nourish them - with loaves of bread, and with words of understanding and compassion. Jesus shows us that once we recognize others as our sisters and brothers, caring for their needs will become a natural part of who we are.

In a few minutes, you and I will have the opportunity to be fed and nourished with the Bread and Cup of Holy Communion. Even the name of this Sacrament, *Communion*, reminds us that we receive - and we share - Divine blessings as a *community*. And as a

community of modern-day shepherds, our simple, yet profound task is to make sure that *everyone* knows that they, too, are invited to this Table of Grace. For when it comes to reaching-out to others with Christ's extravagant welcome and love, there's no need for us to be shy. And there's certainly no need for us to feel sheepish!