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July 22, 2018

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“Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock!” This is a favorite theme of prophets, parishioners who are not happy with their pastors, and folks who want to bash the hierarchy or critique politicians who foment divisiveness. But pay attention! In today’s readings the role of critic belongs to God who then hands humanity the task of remediation.

Even our beloved Psalm 23, that promise of green pastures and restful waters, gives us precious little time to rest before God leads us along paths that include a long walk in a dark valley before we get to the Lord’s banquet table. Our shepherd has a mission in mind for us.

That’s the lesson brought home to the poor disciples whom Jesus invited on a getaway in today’s Gospel. They had just returned from their first foray into mission. They were so excited about all they had accomplished that they didn’t even mention that John the Baptist had been executed while they were on the road. That should have been a hint to them about the things to come, but maybe they were avoiding the topic on purpose.

Perhaps it was the combination of things — the apostles’ success, John’s death and the relentless crowds — that gave Jesus the idea they should hop a boat and disappear. Whatever his intention, it turned out to be a time of teaching. The obvious teaching was the “many things” that Mark tells us Jesus taught the crowds. More important was what he taught the disciples.

Mark tells the story in his typical stark style, leaving it to the readers to mine the wealth of meaning he hides in each phrase. The most telling sentence of this Gospel says that when Jesus saw the people looking for him “his heart was moved with pity ... for they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

The word translated as pity means that Jesus’ guts were wrenched as he saw them. This is like the feeling of parents who see their child in real pain. The people’s hunger, their heartfelt search, their longing for more, called Jesus forth. He allowed their need to turn him into a shepherd.

That was Jesus’ lesson for the disciples. Beyond anything words could explain, they saw how he identified with the needs that appeared before him. He was showing his followers that if they wanted to carry forth his mission, they had to feel the real needs of the people. Only then would they know what they had to offer.

Pope Francis explains this in *Evangelii Gaudium* (“Joy of the Gospel”) when he says that an evangelizing community gets involved in people’s daily lives, it bridges difference and is even willing to abase itself if necessary (EG #24). Lest we be too concerned for efficiency and our free time, Francis also reminds us that something lovers understand instinctively applies to our mission as well: “Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time” (ibid).

Jesus went off to rest with his disciples and, although he may not have planned it that way, their lost retreat turned into one of the most important and memorable times they spent with him. Jesus’ response to this crowd would lead to the great communion among the multitude that we will contemplate for the next few weeks, and it all began because Jesus saw that the people needed a shepherd.

Today’s readings won’t allow us to sit back and criticize our leaders. Instead, they invite us to look at what is lacking in our church and society and allow the hungers of our world to call us forth as the crowd called Jesus. One of the most beautiful texts from the Second Vatican Council states that “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well” (*Gaudium et Spes* #1).

Christ’s followers must look at our world and ask what deep and truly human hopes and hungers are being unconsciously expressed in the blind competition of sports fans, the addictions that plague every strata of society, supremacy movements and all the isms that divide our people. Some political leaders benefit from discord and some religious figures make a fortune as they encourage us to wait for everything to be resolved in heaven. Neither the Gospel nor Vatican II supports such approaches.

Francis puts the call clearly when he says, “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are” (EG #26). Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Today’s liturgy tells us to become the shepherds our world needs.

JEREMIAH 23:1-6

Today’s selection from Jeremiah offers a comparatively gentle take on a topic that Ezekiel (Chapter 34) ranted about: shepherds (kings or priests) who use their office to serve themselves. They are the antithesis of who they are called to be as the agents of God’s loving care. Jeremiah’s proclamation offers both moral teaching and an assurance that God will not fail to rectify the situation. The 99 percent of us not in church leadership can be tempted to take this reading as an invitation to play “pin the blame on the leaders.”

There certainly is a time when we should raise our voices in protest against injustice, incompetency or apathy on the part of leadership. As members of the body of Christ we have the responsibility to call one another to fulfill the demands of our vocation, but we must beware of the danger of allowing fraternal correction to degrade into unproductive grumbling, gossip or retaliation.

Our world offers a plethora of would-be leaders. One lesson we could take from Jeremiah entails learning about what he says God criticizes in unworthy shepherds. We can then use his criteria to discern who is worthy of our following.

God’s first complaint is that shepherds have scattered the sheep. When the indictment switches from the animal kingdom to the political world, it takes but a moment to realize that oppressors’ best policy for insuring their longevity is to divide the oppressed. When they incite confusion or rivalry among the least powerful, they need do little more to keep everyone under control.

God’s second major complaint is that the uncaring shepherds don’t bother to understand the real condition of their sheep. The word here translated as “care for” can also mean “visit.” As Pope Francis might say, these shepherds don’t even recognize their sheep, much less share their smell. Their judgments about what is good or harmful come from their own theories, untainted by practical experience.

God’s chosen shepherds offer an alternative to the wicked and are recognizable by the daily activities that demonstrate their genuine concerns. They go out seeking the remnant who have been deprived of their birthright. They make real plans and lead their sheep to meadows where everyone can thrive. Finally, they are the ones who put an end to fear and trembling and do not rest as long as anyone is not able to flourish within the fold.

Jeremiah's message calls us to wake up and to demand the sort of leadership the people of God deserve. We are promised that God's people will not be left scattered and wandering, but if we want God's will to come to fruition we need to recognize and support the real leaders and call forth a new generation.

PSALMS 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

Today we pray the whole of Psalm 23 as an expression of gratitude for God's unfailing care. Written in the first person singular, the psalm invites each one of us to pray from the depths of our own life experience. With a prayer so familiar, we need to be careful to avoid the tendency to repeat the words without thinking, without savoring their meaning.

Psalm 23 is probably the most popular song in the psalter because of the wealth of its images. After the opening line proclaims, "I shall not want," the rest of the psalm ruminates on a variety of the reasons we can say that. The first reason is that God gives us space to thrive — verdant pastures and restful waters to refresh us.

But Psalm 23 does not simply give us a vision of relaxing and playing heavenly harps. Before we even get comfortable by the stream, we pray in gratitude that God leads us in the right way — even if everything seems dangerous or uncharted. The reason we do not fear is not for lack of danger, but because God's righteousness is our protection.

After celebrating God's leadership and protection, the psalm portrays God as a bounteous host. Like Abraham who comforted Lazarus the poor man, God spreads a table in the sight of our enemies, anoints us and more than satisfies our thirst.

In the Christian tradition, the divine actions described by the psalm remind us of the sacraments of initiation: God draws us to the saving waters of baptism, anoints us with the Spirit and invites us to the bountiful table of the Eucharist.

Psalm 23 allows the person who prays it to rejoice in God's intimate and personal care. The more we take it to heart, the more we can confidently repeat the refrain, "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want."

EPHESIANS 2:13-18

There are few selections from the Christian Scriptures that can be applied more directly than this to the challenges faced by Christians in the United States today. Although the author was apparently a Jew writing to Gentile Christians in the first century, the long-standing ethnic and religious prejudices that divided those groups find their contemporary echo in the religious, racial and ethnic divisions that wrack contemporary U.S. society. Paul's reference to the "dividing wall of enmity" separating people almost sounds like a prophecy pronounced twenty centuries in advance of the drawing of borders between the U.S. and Mexico.

Even without imagining that the author of Ephesians had a vision of the 21st century, the message of this passage can speak directly to us. The first thing to notice is that it is addressed to all who call themselves Christians, who believe they have been saved by the blood of Christ. If we count ourselves in that group, we are claiming an identity that is not based on anything we have done or accomplished, nor on any accident of birth or ethnic or class heritage. Our Christian identity comes solely from accepting the invitation of Christ who wishes to create a new humanity in himself.

Paul says that Christ is our peace and has made us one. Simple as that might sound, Paul is referring to a wrenching process of dying to self and becoming new persons, reconciled with God and with one another. It's a process that happens in imitation of Christ who emptied himself to take on the condition of the beloved, only whereas Christ took on the condition of a slave, Christians are invited to empty themselves to take on the very fullness of God. To become one in Christ we must be ready to let go of the lesser values and preferences that divide us in order to be reconciled with all those called into life with us.

Pope Francis tells us that the "locus of this reconciliation of differences is within ourselves, in our own lives." He reminds us that the "unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity. It overcomes every conflict by creating a new and promising synthesis" (EG #229-230). Francis calls us who are given life by the blood of Christ and called into being by the Spirit to be a "community of missionary disciples who take the first step" (EG #24).

The Letter to the Ephesians calls us to risk taking the next step of reconciliation in our society and church. This call has a unique resonance in the United States, whose national motto is *e pluribus unum*. It becomes far more intense when we remember that the church is called to be catholic, with room for everyone. Improbable as it may seem, the task is not impossible because as our reading says, “We have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

MARK 6:30-34

Taken in context, today’s short Gospel is not so much an independent unit as a transition from one scene to another and a setup for the scene to come when thousands will find their nourishment in Jesus. As an independent incident, it reflects on Jesus’ overwhelming popularity and his attention to everyone in need.

As the scene opens, Mark tells us that the “apostles” gathered with Jesus. This is the only time in Mark’s Gospel that disciples are called apostles. (The title is nowhere near as common as we might think: It appears only here in Mark, once in Matthew, six times in Luke and never in John.) They have just come back from their mission and Jesus invites them to go with him to a desert place to rest. (Resting is also a rather uncommon concept in the Christian Scriptures. This is the only time it has a positive connotation.)

Mark builds this story with care to awaken his readers’ religious imagination and memory. When Mark said that Jesus and companions were headed for a deserted place, Jewish people pictured the scene against the background of the desert of the Exodus and the Israelites who followed Moses into the wilderness. The people seeking Jesus’ company set up the next scene. Jesus and the disciples arrive at their destination only to find that the crowds have anticipated their arrival and are waiting for them before they can begin to settle in.

In the most evocative part of this reading, Mark tells us that Jesus saw the crowd and “his heart was moved with pity for them for they were like sheep without a shepherd.” The word pity (*splanchnizomai*, also translatable as compassion) has a particular meaning in New Testament Greek. The people of Jesus’ time understood the intestines to be the seat of feelings and the word pity meant “to feel the bowels yearn.” This is hardly the response of a detached superior to an underling. This describes someone whose care for the other moves from the inside out, someone who, as an old saying goes, sees the other weep and tastes tears. Mark is painting a picture of Jesus as someone who so resonated with the people’s desire that their hopes overcame his preferences, their hungry desire for spiritual nourishment moved him to act.

The next phrase adds to that impression and begins to set the scene for what is to come. Mark drew on one of the great images of his culture and faith when he said that Jesus saw the crowd like sheep without a shepherd. David was the prototype, the shepherd-king, the ideal ruler who was concerned for the people, not his own aggrandizement. As a religious image, not only did God call the king to be a shepherd but, as in Psalm 23, God was imagined as the divine shepherd.

This short Gospel adds depth to Mark’s growing portrait of Jesus. Now we see the wonder-working Son of God from Nazareth as the shepherd. He represents the God who allows the people’s hopes and needs to become his own. Mark tells us that Jesus taught the people, but what he did was also a key lesson for the disciples accompanying him.

Planning: 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

In today’s first reading, the prophet Jeremiah foresees the day when God will appoint new shepherds for God’s people, because the shepherds who had been entrusted with the flock have not fulfilled their role properly. It will be no surprise if most people assume that Jeremiah is talking about the clergy. After all, we often speak of the clergy as shepherds of the flock, and some of them have clearly been poor shepherds.

However, if we continue to the end of the passage, it becomes evident that the prophet is speaking about civil rulers. “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up a righteous shoot to David; as king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land.” The king in Israel was to shepherd the flock in God’s stead

and thus to act as God would act.

So, this passage may more properly be applied to government leaders, especially those in charge of the nation. In the first reading, God complains that the shepherds “have scattered my sheep and driven them away.” In the second reading, St. Paul reminds us that Christ’s mission was one of reconciliation, of bringing people together rather than scattering them. In the Gospel, Jesus takes pity on the crowd, “for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.” It is the love of God for people that should draw them together.

If we seek to apply these texts to our time, our attention may be drawn to those political leaders and opinion-makers, whether elected or self-appointed, who seek power by driving people apart. They benefit from extremism and polarization while they destroy the fabric that holds a civilized society together. That dynamic might be the focus of preaching today, and such concerns can certainly find their way into the petitions of the general intercessions. Pray for leaders who put the care of the nation before their own agendas, for opinion-makers who foster tolerance and understanding rather than division and hatred, for the courage to work for unity both in our church and our country, etc.

Planners and other parish leaders might also examine their own approach to their ministries. Do you foster understanding and unity in the parish or are you sometimes a cause of division? Do you manifest the love of God for all people, regardless of their differences? Do you make efforts to welcome newcomers and minority groups fully into the parish? While division may happen when the word of God is preached authentically, we should strive to make sure our own unchristian behavior is not the cause of such division.

Prayers: 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Peg Ekerdt

Introduction

The Sunday readings call to mind Pope Francis’ strong advice that priests and leaders of the church must be shepherds who smell like sheep. The Scriptures remind us that the shepherd shall bring peace and justice to his people, shall reconcile differences, unite all peoples and teach, minister and serve the God’s people with compassion that mirrors God’s own.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you are our justice and our peace: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you break down the walls that divide us: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you are the compassionate shepherd who feeds our souls: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for the needs of this gathered community and for our world.

Minister For the church, we who continue the work of the first apostles, for the ability to imitate the compassion of the good Shepherd who seeks the lost, who calls to justice, who feeds us daily ... we pray,

- For renewed commitment to faithful citizenship: to serve the least among us — to pay a just wage, to welcome the stranger, to encourage the prisoner, to negotiate differences ... we pray,
- For perseverance in our attempts to “come away” to deserted places to rest awhile, for time to pray, for renewal of right relationship with our Lord, we pray,
- For victims of discrimination — for victims of gun violence — for victims of pay day loans — for commitment among us to address the complex problems of poverty and injustice ... we pray,

- For families who live with addiction, for those who struggle with mental illness or depression, for all among us who are sick ... we pray,
- For nations who are at war, and all places of conflict in our world; for all of us — for the will to imitate the love of Christ Jesus who breaks down walls of division and preaches peace to all people ... we pray,

Presider Shepherd of souls, we surrender our prayers to you, both spoken and unspoken, with trust that you hear us and fill our every need. In a world sorely in need of your peace and begging for right relationship with all peoples, we ask you to make us instruments of your compassion and grace. May we bear witness to your love with the witness of our lives. We ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen

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