

Sheep with a Shepherd
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 (NRSV)
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On January 10 of 2015 in the national football league division playoff the New England Patriots were playing the Baltimore Ravens and losing in the fourth quarter. Little did the audience nor the Ravens know but the play called in the huddle was something very unique. Tom Brady got the ball from center and passed a quick lateral to Julian Edelman who the Ravens certainly thought would try to run out of the backfield but instead he threw the ball 51 yards to Danny Amendola for a touchdown and eventually the win. It was an awesome play and it worked perfectly! It was also the first time Edelman had thrown a touchdown since college and the first time the Patriots tried that play since 2001.

As we enter our scripture today, the disciples have been wildly successful out in the world where they went and proclaimed that all should repent. Jesus had sent them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits and they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them, and they wanted to tell their shepherd all about it! (Mark 6: 12-13, NRSV)

But Jesus didn't just send them out into the wilderness, before he sent them out they had a huddle - like football players. Coach Jesus told them the play -

⁸These were his instructions:

“Take nothing for the journey except a staff—
no bread,
no bag,
no money in your belts.

⁹Wear sandals but not an extra shirt.

¹⁰Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town.

¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

And they knew this play! Their shepherd sent them into the world with a powerful symbol of their Hebrew heritage because when their ancestors had prepared to leave Egypt 1700 years before, they were told to eat the Passover meal ready to escape, with nothing except a staff their sandals and a tunic. (Exodus 12:11) The Hebrew nation was expected to be radically dependent upon God in the Exodus and the disciples were expected to be radically dependent upon God as they went on the mission trail.

And the play worked as designed - like magic. ¹² They went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. Not a bad way to start your ministry I'd say.

The flow of activity in the disciple's lives has been pretty hectic. Going back just a few passages we find Jesus and the disciples were surrounded by such a large crowd that Jesus had to teach from a boat - speaking back to the shoreline and he told the crowd the parable of the Sower. Then He and the disciples all got in boats and went across to the Geresenes, experiencing a huge storm that Jesus quelled. Then Jesus got out and healed the Demoniac - chasing away the Legion of demons inside of him, casting them into a herd of pigs. Then they got back in boats and went across the lake again and yet another huge crowd gathered. Jesus healed the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years and healed Jarius' daughter and then they headed back to Nazareth where he was rejected by his hometown and then Jesus sent them all out to heal in God's name on the mission trail. I don't know how your week went, but this sounds pretty busy.

And then, only then, they set off in a boat to a deserted place for a rest, and maybe to tell their stories.

Now, just because it isn't written doesn't mean it didn't happen. So in this case, in this part of the story we discount the geography and time because they are also not written. Jesus and the disciples rowed across the sea a distance of about 4 miles while the crowd marched around the lake a distance of nearly 10 miles. It probably took both groups about 2-3 hours to make their respective trips. When they reached the "other side" we are a little bit surprised that Jesus immediately went back to work. I would suggest that in this busy time of ministry, there was no time to rest on land and Jesus knew it. Everywhere he went people flocked to him so this was their time of rest, on the lake, gathered together as a group. 6 times in Mark this type of trip is mentioned.

Jesus' ministry was, as it says here, a ministry of compassion. Verse 34 says that as "he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd..."

The word compassion is a shepherd kind of word.

It's also a word often associated with Jesus, 8 times it is used specifically when talking about His interactions with people. Because he is God's unique representative in history, we know that compassion is part of the essence of the God who created us and who loves us.

Compassion is not a word regularly associated with the religious leaders of Jesus' day. The priestly cast had established an intricate and guarded ritual for anyone who wanted to approach the God that they knew. And Jesus' later claims; to be the path to God would certainly be a challenge to that view of religion and authority.¹

The picture of a shepherd was also not one associated with the power of established authority. Shepherds were on the bottom rung of society, associated with the unclean and unloved. This is a paradox of the Hebrew

¹ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: a Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*, Year B (London: Continuum International Pub. Group, 1994), 261-2.

religion and of later Christianity because although poorly regarded in society, shepherds are well regarded in almost all accounts in scripture. Psalm 23 brings the shepherd motif to its apex with the picture it develops of God's love for his people. The intimacy of this loving relationship is definite:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

he restores my soul.

I fear no evil;

you anoint my head with oil;

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

It's almost funny that God remains mysterious to us when it is clear that the Lord,

who tells us in so many ways of his love for us; from God the Father who made us, to God the Son who saved us, to God the Holy Spirit who sustains our faith shows that this love for us is the paramount confirmation that God is with Us, within our very being.

Last week I spoke of our extravagant God who showers blessings upon us simply because he loves us and wants to bless us. Not our doing - just Gods.

But, there is a caveat to that thought, isn't there?

John 3 offers us this thought in a back to back assertion when Jesus himself says that

The Son of Man must be lifted up so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

God loves us, yes! But we have to believe to be showered with these blessings. In essence, we have to choose to be the sheep of the shepherd.

If you have not read this week's Wednesday email from the church office, well you really should. At the beginning of the letter, Bridgette offers us a short dog story - if you haven't read it, it basically goes like this. She and Jimmy took in a rescue dog a number of years ago who needed a lot of care (his name was Gus, the Basset hound) and he was with the family for quite a few years and they loved Gus and he loved them. Well, Gus has been gone for awhile and although having a dog with problems like his was difficult, he was an awesome loving creature. So, they are now going to take in another rescue dog with the same problems Gus had and likely the same unconditional love that dogs always seem to share.

Now, sheep are not dogs, and people are certainly not sheep nor dogs but the dog recognizes his master and sheep recognize their shepherd. Jesus draws upon this truth in John 10 when he says:

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.

When we believe Jesus, we are sheep with a shepherd and we recognize His voice in our lives. These people who ran around the lake to meet Jesus on the other side be healed knew their shepherd too. These people recognized their shepherd when they saw him and they wanted others to see him as well. And it's no wonder when to simply touch the fringe of His cloak meant to be healed.

We are not told here, what being healed looked like but we certainly have examples of Jesus' style of healing from other passages, often healing of first the spirit and then healing the body.

In Luke 5 the paralytic man is lowered through the roof by his friends and his sins are forgiven and body his body healed and he gets up and walks away.

In Matthew 8 it says that when evening came, they brought to Him many who were demon-possessed; and He cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were ill.

And in 1 Peter 2, the disciple who knew Jesus best said of Him that He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds we were healed.

So, we can imagine that all these who touched the hem of his robe had their souls cleansed even as their bodily infirmities were restored to goodness.

These people recognized Jesus for what he is, for what he says he is - the good shepherd.

Who here, right now couldn't use a little healing? Or a lot?

Imagine a service here at Dunn's Corners where everyone who came in needing healed bodies or souls, by the time the postlude played walked out with soul, mind, and body restored. Would we ever leave?

I find these passages today a very exciting story - a story of great hope for all of us.

As a believer - I've known of Jesus and His love for decades but I've rarely if ever felt this kind of excitement for Him or for my own spiritual self. In ministry I've never really felt like I've thrown that winning touchdown, never really marveled about what I've done and taught and wanted to tell my shepherd all about it.

But, then again, on the other side, as a seeker of God's favor, when have I ever run to the other side of the lake dragging my cancer-ridden neighbor or my soul-troubled friend behind me?

Right. Never.

So maybe I'm not so in touch with my shepherd. Maybe I'm not listening closely enough for my shepherd's voice or like a lost sheep, I'm simply trying to make it on my own.

We are actually sheep with a shepherd. But when we seek our own way, like sheep without a shepherd, we often end up in places that provide us no sustenance, that leave us unfulfilled. Sheep are that way, they can get lost and they need a good shepherd, one who leads them to good pasture, to safe lodging.

It is worth considering that our Lord has compassion on us and loves us so completely that simply by our believing we are blessed with healing and spiritual fullness. It is also worth considering that we should be willing to drag our neighbors who are sheep without a shepherd before the throne of our Lord and offer them this same experience of compassion and healing that we are given. Simply because we believe, and thus, we are sheep - with a shepherd.