

July 18, 2021 @ Trinity Bixby
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Jeremiah 23:1-7 & Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Shepherds are not meant to lead sheep astray. There's a fundamental trust between the sheep and the shepherd, that the sheep will follow the shepherd because the shepherd cares for them, helps them find their way home, and live their best sheepy life. So when shepherds don't follow through on their end, what happens? Nothing good. When the prophet Jeremiah starts preaching to the people that many of their shepherds have led them astray, God responds with promises to do the opposite: to bring the people home, to help them be fruitful, and to provide new shepherds that comfort and protect the people. This is an example of what the Hebrew people called *chesed* and is usually translated "loving-kindness" today. But the concept of *chesed* involves as much loyalty-love and merciful-goodness as it does loving-kindness – it's a hard concept to translate into English, since we don't have one word that covers all of its meanings. It is that sure love that will not let us go. It is God's love for us – not our love for God. We go astray, but God remains mercifully good, loyally loving, and lovingly kind. Jeremiah the prophet demands righteousness before God, but when that righteousness is not found, God leans heavily into *chesed* to help bring us back into right relationship with God and each other.

To put this another way, when the shepherds go bad, God has mercy on the sheep.

Now, when Jeremiah was writing his prophesy, Zedekiah was the king. Zedekiah's name translates as "The Eternal is My Righteousness" – and so, when Jeremiah says that God will raise up a Righteous Branch of David, who will be known as "The Eternal is OUR righteousness" he's both punning on Zedekiah's name, and making a subtle insult at the king. Zedekiah was after his own gain, promising allegiance to the Babylonians, and secretly plotting with the Egyptians to overthrow the Babylonian control of the region. His rule of Israel ended when the Babylonians took direct control of Israel, and sent the people into exile.

So when Jesus' ministry began, and he was surrounded by crowds of people, whom he helped directly, people began to ask if he might be the one Jeremiah was referring to. After all, unlike Zedekiah, Jesus cared more for the people than he did for the political leadership. Jesus' name in Hebrew is Yeshua, which translates as "The Eternal is Our Salvation." Jesus is worn out and tired, seeking a bit of alone time, but he is still moved by compassion to teach and heal the people who had run all the way around the lake just to see him. "Moved by compassion" is even a little light of a translation, too – the Greek is closer to, "groaned from his spleen" or "had visceral empathy." (The spleen was seen as the center of emotion, the same way we refer to the heart).

The people were "like sheep without a shepherd" – a step up from being sheep with a bad shepherd! And though Mark never shares these words of Jesus, John's Gospel tells us that Jesus refers to himself as the "Good Shepherd" – leaning into this metaphor. The people need guidance, but are ready to be a community, an *ekklesia*. This Greek word means "those called out" – it shares a root with our word exclaim! It's the earliest word for a community of people, called out to receive "God's judging, forgiving, renewing grace."¹ As we receive this grace from God, we are likewise sent out as "agents of God's judgement, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in the world."² God's *chesed*, loving-kindness, calls us in as the church, *ekklesia*, and sends us out under Christ's leadership. Our Good Shepherd calls us together, even when we make missteps, even when we graze the wrong grass, or pollute the waters – the Good Shepherd calls us back, and helps us make right what has been made wrong.

The loving-kindness of the Good Shepherd reminds us that we are set apart as the Body of Christ not because we do not sin, or because of what we have – rather, it's because of what we seek and want to become. We seek grace in God's mercy, and we want to become more like Christ, the Good Shepherd. We are the body, always joined to the head, and always needing the Shepherd's guidance.

¹ Shirley Guthrie.

² Ibid

Now, you've likely seen the Celtic cross, like the one behind me now, time and time again. This particular symbol originates in the Verdant Isle of Eire, now known as Ireland. The story goes that as Christianity gained a foothold among the Irish kings, they discovered a problem with marking the graves of the faithful, like they did on the European continent. You see, Ireland was so green because it rained a great deal, and wooden grave markers would quickly rot away. But every time they tried to make a stone grave marker in the shape of a cross, the arms would be too heavy, and would break off. Stone pillars, as were used in most of Europe, were associated too strongly in Ireland with the Viking rune stones; they really wanted something visually distinctive to show the Christian hope of the resurrection. So, one clever person realized that if you add a circle to the cross, the circle bears the weight of the arms, and maintains its distinctive shape.

These grave markers in the shape of a cross with a circle eventually became associated with the churches built near the cemeteries – and visitors would ask about them and their story. Rather than only tell the physical reason for the unique cross, the Irish priests used them to teach lessons of Christian faith. The vertical stroke of the cross tells us that God plants us where God chooses, reaching us in compassion, just as Jesus was moved viscerally to help. The horizontal stroke reminds us that we, as the body of Christ, must reach out to the world, following our Good Shepherd even at the risk of breaking away – because we trust that the One God will hold us up, like the circle holds up the arms, keeping us in relationship with God and each other even when we are too weak to carry on.

I was reminded a few years ago of how widely the symbol of the Celtic Cross had spread. As a parting gift from the Nome Ministerial Association in Alaska, one of the pastors gave me a Celtic cross made out of iron, with Hebrew letters spelling out *chesed* – loving-kindness – inscribed onto it. This pastor and I had rarely seen eye-to-eye theologically, but we trusted that, since we both served God, God's loving-kindness was enough for us both. This pastor forged the cross himself, making it all the more special a gift. I still wear the cross during Lent, thinking about how God has led humanity, all of us, to this time and place – and how the Good Shepherd

wants us to reach out in loving-kindness to the world where God has led us, with the circle of God's support always with us.

So, I challenge you to think and pray on this: why has the Good Shepherd led this community here? What is God calling us to do together – now and in the future? And how have you seen the circle of God's loving-kindness holding us together even in the midst of difficulty?

May the Holy One continue to call you into relationship with God and each other. May you reach out to the Good Shepherd for healing and reconciliation – and may the Holy Spirit sustain you in God's *chesed* as you in turn heal and reconcile with others. Amen.