

## **Rev. Jim's Sermon – The Good Shepherd**

Sunday April 21, 2024

Most preachers, whether they know it or not, are usually preaching to themselves. The rest of you are listening in to the preacher's self-talk. And it is up to you to take what makes sense (if anything does) and do some reflecting on your own.

I know I am always preaching mostly to myself. This is particularly true this week, because the Gospel addresses a topic that I have always struggled with, that is, how to be a good follower, a good sheep. I have never been a good follower. I either put too many expectations on mentors or not enough. I either envy those in charge, and find lots wrong with them, or I hold them on a pedestal until a fault appears (usually quickly) and I can totally write them off. And I usually have a certain resistance to giving my power to other people, perhaps because I am not convinced that they will use the power I give them to make life better for anyone other than themselves. Does this ring true for anyone?

Perhaps part of my problem with following spiritual or religious leaders is that I have encountered so many of them who were unethical and corrupt, or worse. And when corruption is combined with charisma and spiritual power, terrible things result.

I used to work for a priest who wrote books about what he called Creation Spirituality. His books weren't bad, they were very warm and fuzzy. He, on the other hand, was an arrogant bully. He ran a school where he offered a master's degree in spirituality. Every fall the students, who had read all his books, would come ready to meet this wonderful, compassionate teddy bear of a priest. It usually took about a month before a general cry of outrage went up from the students that they had been hood winked. This priest was great, as long as you didn't have to encounter him face to face. In some ways, it was his saving grace. His own rotten personality saved him from becoming a guru and a cult leader of some kind.

I met a more harmful spiritual guru when I was in my 20s, and I had an interest in Islamic spirituality. A friend of mine knew people who were followers of a very powerful Sufi Sheik or teacher from Croatia. He was a remarkable man, who worked in nuclear medicine, whatever that is, and he was the leader of a number of spiritual communities throughout the US. Occasionally I would travel with my

friend to hear this man speak. He radiated tremendous energy and power. On one occasion, as he was speaking, a dog outside began to bark. He turned to a young man, who we knew, named Haroun. He said, "Haroun go and kill that dog." To my horror, Haroun got up and began to walk out of the room. But the teacher stopped him just as he reached the door and said, "No, go sit, but that is the kind of obedience I demand from my students." Needless to say, that was the last talk of his I attended.

I could go on, but it only gets worse, and I think you get the point, that spiritual power, charisma, brilliance even the ability to work wonders, is not in itself an indication of holiness or even human decency.

I recently heard that there are over 4000 cultish groups in North America. They typically include a charismatic leader who is followed blindly and unquestionably by their disciples. It is a rare case when such a leader isn't or doesn't become corrupted and exploitative.

And this corruption, as we know, happens with Rabbis, Priests and Christian ministers of all stripes, and other religious and pseudo-religious leaders as well.

In the metaphor from today's Gospel, these leaders are not the hired hands who scatter at the first sign of danger, they are the wolves preying on people's trust and vulnerability.

Of course there are good shepherds: Saints Francis and Dominic and Teresa of Avila, whose followers continue to create communities of study and service in their names. And there are secular leaders who have been wise shepherds. I think of Nelson Mandela and Martin and Coretta Scott King, Mohandas Gandhi and many others.

So what makes a good shepherd and what makes a good sheep? When Jesus said to the disciples "Follow me," what was he asking? What is he asking of us?

These are the questions I put to myself this week.

As usual, the Gospel that presents the challenge also offers the way forward.

Jesus is very clear about how to recognize a good shepherd. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Leadership for Jesus is always servant leadership. There is nowhere in the Gospel that Jesus requires or even requests, that his followers worship him. In fact, when they do, he tells them to stop. I think of Jesus preparing to wash Peter's feet. "Never, Lord", Peter says. And Jesus says? "If I do not wash your feet you will have no part of me." When he finishes washing the feet of the disciples he says simply: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

The job of the leader is not to be served but to serve. To use power, whether spiritual or intellectual power given them by God, or the power and authority given to them by the community, for the good of those around them. Alas, how rare this is. How difficult for leaders who become powerful to maintain their perspective.

Good shepherds are those who see no distinction between their welfare and the welfare of their flock; who are ready even to put the interests of their followers above their own interests.

It is never good for any human leader to believe their own press. Leadership first and foremost, requires humility and a servant heart, or it quickly becomes something else, something that looks more like self-serving.

A good shepherd, Jesus continues, is one who knows and is known by the flock.

Jesus indicates that a good shepherd is not a lone ranger, not someone who rules according to their own whims. Jesus ties his relationship with his followers (with us) to his relationship to God the Father:

"I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." Good shepherds are themselves shepherded; a good shepherd never claims power for themselves but acknowledges that the gifts they offer are gifts God has given them.

Good followers follow because they recognize the shepherd. As Jesus says, "My sheep know my voice."

To be a good follower, means to listen, to discern, to become adept at separating the wheat of wisdom from the chaff that spills out of our screens on a daily basis. It means developing the capacity to be quiet and to listen to the still small voice with which God speaks to us. We follow, because we hear the voice of the shepherd,

not just with our ears, but with our hearts. We follow because we have no choice, because our heart directs us to do so.

To be a good follower, a good sheep, doesn't mean to follow blindly, or to give up our critical power, our capacity for thinking. It does mean to listen carefully, to trust, and to open ourselves to wisdom, and wisdom is not a limited commodity. Wisdom is everywhere, spoken by a thousand voices. It comes from the flock of which we are a part, but also from other flocks, other traditions.

Good followers follow because they know that they cannot survive, much less thrive, on our own. *We are not* on our own. No one is an island. One of the graces that come from following Jesus is the experience of being connected, to God, to the earth, to the human community.

To know how to be a good follower, we must recognize what is a good shepherd, and the best place to start is with the Jesus.

Whether we choose it or not, we all have opportunities in our lives to follow and to lead. And to be good at both, the same fundamentals apply. Humility, trust, openness, discernment, loyalty and most important of all, as Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, "Whoever wishes to be a leader among you, must first be of service."

If we all just gave power to those leaders whose only intention is to serve, how different would the world be, perhaps it would become very quickly the kingdom of heaven.

I think I feel better about being a follower now. I hope you do too.