

No "Other"

Psalm 23 and John 10:11-18

Few images have captured the religious imagination of both Jews and Christians in their conception of God, as that of a shepherd. Exhibit A in supporting that claim would be Psalm 23—the Shepherd Psalm—which opens with the claim that “The Lord is my shepherd” and goes on to name the attributes associated with shepherding as a way of praising the provision and protection discovered by those who entrust themselves to God’s care.

Rulers and religious leaders were also described in terms of being “shepherds” whose duty it was to reflect God’s love for the people in their care. At one point in the Book of Ezekiel, God expresses impatience with some of these shepherds when they abuse their positions of leadership to benefit themselves while ignoring the needs of those it was their duty to care for. God promises to personally intervene to provide justice for those who suffer from the negligence of these “false shepherds.” God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel, saying “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” It was God’s way of saying, “I guess that if I want this job done right, I’d better do it myself.”

Then along came Jesus, who never possessed any official man-made political or religious authority, but who did all the compassionate and caring things for people that shepherds were expected to do for their flocks. He sought out those who had lost their way. He brought back the ones who had strayed from God’s purpose for them. He healed the sick and injured. He strengthened the weak by treating them with the dignity of God’s own children. Until one day, he came right out and said it. “I am the good shepherd.”

The Greek word *kalos* that gets translated in that verse as “good” actually possesses more emphasis than simply describing something that is good or nice, as opposed to being bad. A translation that perhaps more clearly captures the fullness of meaning would be something like “I am the ideal shepherd. I am the model of what a shepherd is supposed to be.”

Or, this “if you want to see what shepherding that truly puts the best interests of the flock before all else—like the Shepherd in the 23rd Psalm—then watch what I do. I will even lay down my life for the sheep.” Five times in that short passage, Jesus claimed that he would lay down his life for his sheep. Then he proved that he wasn’t kidding, on Calvary.

Jesus was the One through whom God fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel. The promise that God would personally shepherd God’s people the way they should be shepherded. God intervened through the Good Shepherd—the ideal, the model Shepherd—in Jesus. God still seeks to intervene through those who are of the Good Shepherd’s flock and who listen to the Good Shepherd’s voice and who faithfully follow the Good Shepherd’s ways.

Jesus said, “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 and one shepherd.” The “other sheep” Jesus was referring to were Gentiles. From the Jewish perspective, Gentiles were “Other” because they were not included in

God's unique covenant with Israel. Even Jesus' Jewish disciples did not imagine that he was a Shepherd for anyone other than his own people. It took some time before they accepted that Gentile "others" should be included in this flock.

But there many different alienated people that Jesus sought to bring into his flock. He recognized the humanity of others who were regarded as enemies, including Samaritans and Romans. He regathered those who had strayed morally, including tax collectors and prostitutes, gaining for himself a reputation for associating with sinners. He bound up the wounds of lepers, the blind and the crippled, incurring the disapproval of those who criticized him for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus knew that the only way there could ever be one flock was if there were no "others" who were excluded. He understood that there could never be one Shepherd until people learned to distinguish his voice from the voices from the many false shepherds in the world.

Who are the "others" in our world today? Who are the alienated and rejected waiting to be found and brought into the flock? Who are the underprivileged? Who is not granted equal status or equal opportunity? Who is denied justice? Who is left to the wolves? Where are the Shepherds to give them rest in green pastures and lead them beside still waters and stand by them as they make their way through the dark and threatening valleys? Do the others of our time recognize the voice of Jesus speaking for them in Christ's Church? Do those who fear losing the privileges they have been accustomed to if the gates are opened for those privileges to be shared equitably with others hear the reassuring voice of the Shepherd promising that they will not want for any necessity? Does the voice of the Good Shepherd speak through his Church to change their hearts?

Jesus said, "I know my own and my own know me." But how do we know him? Do we know him as the Good Shepherd who we can trust to care for us so that we need not want for anything in life? For certain he is that. But he is also the Ideal Shepherd, against whom false shepherds fail to measure up by comparison. And, he is the Model Shepherd. The one who perfectly models for us the gracious, merciful and just nature of God. And who also provides us with the model that his flock is called to follow.

Most of us know the Shepherd's Psalm like the back of our hand. But sometimes the more familiar we are with something, the easier it is to miss something important about it. Have you ever noticed that the 23rd Psalm is divided into two parts? The first half of the Psalm describes a journey. A journey where the Good Shepherd leads us beside still waters and through dark valley with times of nourishment in green pastures and times of spiritual restoration for our souls. These verses invite us to trust in the Shepherd for all our needs. They also beckon us to learn from the Shepherd how to tend to the needs of others.

The second part of the Psalm shifts gears. In the closing verses, we are no longer being led by the Shepherd on a journey. It is here that we arrive at our destination to which the journey has brought us. We are extravagantly welcomed into a home where we are greeted with oil for our tired bodies and souls. We are seated a table filled with good things to satisfy our hungers and overflowing cups to quench our thirsts. We are surprised to look across the table to find our enemies seated there with us. Except... thinking of ourselves as enemies makes no sense because a shared table where plenty and hospitality are freely given and received is a place of fellowship, not enmity.

And where there are no enemies there is no "Other". Just one flock, and one Shepherd.

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