

## The Good Shepherd

In my initial planning for this Sunday, I was looking at a sermon drawn from Exodus on the manifestation of God to the Israelites as cloud and as fire. I was looking forward to the process of preparing that sermon and on tying it in to this past Thursday's observation of Earth Day. But shortly before my vacation, it occurred to me that this would be "Good Shepherd Sunday," the traditional Sunday to read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and one of the passages in the Gospel According to John in which Jesus identifies himself with David's image of God. I've always loved preaching on "Good Shepherd Sunday" as the pastor or shepherd of Good Shepherd Baptist Church and I decided that I just couldn't pass it up. The cloud and the fire can wait for another time.

But I also decided that I didn't want to preach yet again from those familiar passages in John. Surely, I thought, there must be some shepherd passages in the Bible which I've not yet worked over. And, providentially, I had provided myself with some excellent study material not long ago by buying a book by Kenneth E. Bailey called The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament. I hope the name Kenneth Bailey rings a bell for you. If I suddenly had to divest myself of my theological library, as Pam and Charlie did a couple of years ago, I'd be hard-pressed to give up Bailey's books, from which I've drawn for a number of sermons. You may remember the diagram of the typical first-century Palestinian house, which I've used to shed light on the likely circumstances of Jesus' birth – not in a stable, but in the main room of a family home. That comes from Bailey's book, Jesus Through Middle-Eastern Eyes. I've also used his Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes, in the past. The late Rev. Dr. Bailey, who died in 2016, put his unconventional upbringing to good use as a Biblical scholar. Though born in Bloomington, Illinois, he was raised in the Middle East, where his parents served as missionaries in Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia. As an adult, Kenneth Bailey also served as a missionary in Egypt and Lebanon and as a professor in the latter country, in addition to service in the U.S. and in Cyprus. His fluency in Arabic and Syriac, as well as Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, enabled him to trace how western translations of the New Testament obscured details still fresh in those eastern languages. A great deal of what I have to say today about Jesus' use of the Good Shepherd image and how his initial audience would have heard it, is attributable to the lessons shared by Rev. Dr. Bailey, which I read while on vacation earlier this month. My observations on current lessons, however, are my own.

Let's begin with those notes on historical context in Luke 15, starting with Luke's own remarks about setting. Luke opens his account with "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." Kenneth Bailey amplifies this by quoting from Fr. Matta al-Miskin, the father of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century revival of Coptic monasticism. Al-Miskin writes, "It is clear that Christ himself was responsible for the drawing near of sinners who came to him and sat to eat with him. They came because in him they discovered themselves to be lost, and their tormented consciences found rest and peace. They loved him because they felt his love for them." Even before we know the reported response of the Pharisees to the attraction Jesus had for the tax collectors and sinners, we can guess at it. Had these "lost sheep of Israel" felt any love from the religious authorities of that day, surely, they would have already turned to them for comfort and instruction. But they did not. Instead, they faced hostility, or at least disdain, from the scribes and Pharisees.

Here's how Luke recorded it: "And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" The failure of the religious leaders to

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extend grace to the sinners is obvious to us. Bailey uses his deep knowledge of κοινῆ, or New Testament Greek, to bring out two other ideas obscured in the English. First, he notes, that the Greek word translated as “welcomes” in our NRSV or as “receives” in the King James Version, carries the extra meaning of “hosting.” For Bailey, this implies that Jesus, at least at one point in his ministry, had a home to call his own, possibly in Capernaum. I’m not sure I’m willing to go that far, as Bailey makes no attempt to harmonize that with Jesus’ claim to homelessness in Matthew and Luke – “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” We do, however, need to pay attention to the image of Jesus as host of the gathering, and I’ll come back to that in a few minutes. Bailey’s other suggestion I find more pertinent. Although various English translations record the Pharisees’ words as “This fellow welcomes sinners,” or “This man...” or “This one...,” there is actually no noun present. As Bailey explains, “The word *this (houtos)*, when standing without a following noun, gives ‘a connotation of contempt.’ The listener/reader can add the missing word, be it ‘this fool’ or ‘this ignorant peasant’ or ‘this little boy’ or something stronger.” By inviting the tax collectors and sinners to sit at table with him, Jesus has invited the absolute scorn of the Pharisees.

And so, Luke tells us, Jesus told them this parable. As Bailey’s excellent book describes, the image of God as the good shepherd was not confined to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm in scriptures available to first century Jews. It was also extensively used by the prophets and Bailey provides excellent teaching on passages from Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, which will, alas, have to wait for another time. Suffice it to say that the prophets use the image of the good shepherd to illuminate the failings of the bad shepherds, the leaders of Israel during their times. From the moment that Jesus asks, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them...?” the Pharisees know they are being compared, unfavorably, to the good shepherd.

Again, Bailey’s life in the Middle East stands him in good stead to uncover meanings we may miss. You may remember that in the Gospel According to John, Jesus makes a distinction about how sheep are cared for by their owner versus by a mere “hireling,” that is, a shepherd for pay. “The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.” But here, Jesus asks, “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep...?” Bailey points out that the words used in the Syriac and Arabic translations of this phrase very clearly indicate ownership of the sheep. In other words, the sinners and tax collectors are part of the Pharisees’ flock and they are responsible for them. Jesus undoubtedly intends for these masters of scriptural knowledge to think of the words of Ezekiel to the bad shepherds of his day: “You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.”

I may be the only one here to let this bother me, but I’ve always wondered about the ninety-nine left in the wilderness. Bailey tells several stories from shepherds he’s known that help explain this. First, he describes how the loss would have been noticed: “They have been through a normal day and, as is customary, the shepherd counts his flock late in the afternoon as he settles them into a secure area for the night. At the end of the count alarm bells start ringing in the back of his head as he realizes that a sheep is missing. The shepherd responds by making the important decision to “leave the flock” exactly where it is there in the wilderness... In real life,”

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he adds, “in the Middle Eastern countryside, a responsible shepherd would never leave ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness without an assistant to guide the sheep home or protect them in a cave (or a roughly constructed wilderness enclosure).” Just as Jesus had the assistance of the Twelve, the Pharisees also had followers who might have carried on teaching while they themselves “sought the lost.” But they did not take advantage of this.

In the stories that Bailey relates, he fills in some details of the story. Lost sheep will find a place to hide, not from the shepherd, but from predators. When it hears the voice of its own shepherd calling for it, it will bleat in response. The shepherd can then find it and, as the sheep is likely to be exhausted, will carry it home. The sheep has an active role to play in its own salvation by responding to the voice of the shepherd and in acquiescing to being rescued and not running away. I’d note that in a like manner, we all need to listen for the voice of our Good Shepherd and heed that voice, not turning away or moving further away.

Jesus continued, “And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’” This is also directed to the Pharisees. As Bailey writes, “Back in the village the shepherd’s friends are happy to attend a party in celebration of the finding of the lost. They do not attack the shepherd for having gotten dirty tramping through the mud to find and restore his lost sheep. Rather they praise him.” Not only are the Pharisees bad shepherds, they are not even capable of praising the good shepherd, Jesus, or rejoicing with him. It makes me check myself. Do I rejoice when I hear that someone has turned toward God, toward the truth, toward life, or do I suspect them of ulterior motives? I know that I am not above the sin of the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus has clearly appropriated for himself the image of the good shepherd in this parable. In doing this, he has once again said for those who know the scriptures that he is fulfilling the promises of God to the Psalmist and to the prophets. In Jesus, they (and now, we) can find the one who will provide all our needs, bringing us to the place of peace, comforting us in our fears, and rescuing us when we stray. I daresay that all of us who are gathered in this corner of cyberspace this morning have felt the reassurance of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in our lives.

Jesus tells another little parable in this passage, one that is less obviously connected to the Good Shepherd image. It is the parable of the woman with the lost coin, and, thanks to Kenneth Bailey’s book, I now know how it connects and can relay that to you. Let’s look back momentarily to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Verse 5 reads, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” Bailey points out that we often disregard an important change in the Psalmist’s metaphor here. This welcoming activity is not performed by a shepherd – who prepares a table for sheep, who would not appreciate it? – but rather a host, or more properly, a hostess. In David’s culture and a thousand years later in the culture of Jesus, the actions of preparing a meal and an overflowing cup for a guest were the work of the woman of the house. David (assuming he was the author of the Psalm) and Jesus are both comfortable with feminine language for God and, in Jesus’ case, for himself. Remember, it is Jesus who has “received” the tax collectors and sinners to dinner. Kenneth Bailey writes, “Jesus wants to reclaim the equality of male and female that begins with Genesis 1:27 and is not always remembered or honored in ancient or modern times. Jesus does so by using a female metaphor for God... The rabbinic tradition,” he adds, “records a parable about a *man* who loses

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a coin.” The rabbis may have been too caught up in patriarchy to compare God to this careful woman, but Jesus is not. I scarcely need say this to the women of Good Shepherd Baptist Church, but gender differences are no barrier to being one who cares for God’s treasure, which is to say humankind and all of creation.

Kenneth Bailey summarizes the teaching of this little parable like this: “The first part of the parable tells the Pharisees that they are like the bad housekeeper and the last part presents Jesus as the good housekeeper who finds the lost coin. What he does, they should do, but they refuse.” It is a lesson that is good for people to hear today, just as it was then. We have certainly seen plenty of examples in recent days of leaders who are bad shepherds and bad housekeepers. They are the ones who act as if a lost sheep is not important enough for them to go out of their way to help. They are the ones who treat those under their leadership like a single penny dropped from a bag overstuffed with hundred-dollar bills. We have seen it in the policy and votes of our national leaders – “People are going to die in a pandemic? Tough, it’s inconvenient for my election chances.” “People in other countries are dying from violence and poverty? Too bad, they’re not our concern.” “People are being denied the right to vote? Well, they weren’t going to vote for me anyway.” We’ve seen it in the words and actions of those we trust with our safety on the local level. “A woman was killed in her bed by police action? Well, she was the ex-girlfriend of a drug dealer, she had it coming.” “A man’s life was snuffed out by a police officer kneeling on his neck? Well, he was high and crazy, and we were scared.” “A child was shot while playing? It looked like a gun to us.” The bad shepherds and the bad housekeepers always have an excuse for not seeking the lost, for not caring for the least, for not loving their neighbor as they do themselves and those excuses always have to do with not being willing to put others needs before their own desires.

My sisters and my brothers, we must continue to say “enough” to the bad shepherds. We must continue to call the bad housekeepers to account. We must be ready at any time and any place to speak the truth to power, just as Jesus did. Earlier in the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus has reminded his disciples, “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more.” It is God, he reminds them, who has control of the fate of their souls and God is the one who does not forget a single sparrow, even though five of them are sold for two cents. “You,” Jesus tells them (and us), “you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Last Wednesday night, as I left home to join some of you and some of our neighbors at Edmonds United Methodist Church for a prayer vigil remembering George Floyd, I saw my neighbor from across the street and told him where I was going and why. “That takes courage,” he said, “to go out in public and stand up for what you believe.” I laughed and told him no one had taken a shot at me yet. Nor did I think that it was a likely occurrence in Edmonds. But it wouldn’t have mattered if it had been likely. I am not much interested in martyrdom but there are things that are worth being reviled for, worth being attacked for, even worth dying for. And being faithful to our calling from Jesus to follow him, to seek the lost, and to comfort the least, and to bind up the wounds of the hurting, that is worth whatever it costs. Because we are safe in the pastures of God, even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And because we are safe, God rejoices. What love! What love! Thanks be to God, Amen.