

"Called to be Shepherds" by David W. Lloyd

A Sermon by David W. Lloyd

Seekers Church

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Called to be Shepherds

I want to suggest to Celebration Circle that they have a Taize service on every Sunday that follows [Deborah's preaching](#). It is very daunting to follow last week's excellent sermon, but I will try.

We are between Easter and Pentecost, between the gift of the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, between the reality that Christ is alive and the reality that the Church is born. For some reason, our lectionary in Acts picks up after Pentecost, when the disciples have become the apostles. They have changed from hiding in fear from the Temple authorities and the Romans to boldly preaching in the Temple that in Jesus is the resurrection of the dead. The Temple authorities arrested them and brought them before a religious tribunal to explain by what authority they have been able to do this, since 5,000 had become believers. Peter boldly proclaimed that the name of Jesus, whom they had crucified, was raised from the dead by God and is the sole source of salvation.

How did this change – from hiding to preaching in the Temple

about Jesus' resurrection – come about? The simple answer is that sometime during those weeks of meeting together in secret, the sheep saw a new vision: the promise of becoming shepherds.

I invite you to say those beloved words from our Psalm from today's lectionary with me:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

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

I know a little bit about sheep. My father was a county agent and as a boy I sometimes went with him to visit farmers, a few of whom raised sheep, and I had 4-H friends who raised them and exhibited them at state fair. We are used to seeing Merino sheep that have big woolly fleece that usually live in fenced lush pastures of green grass with minimal shepherding. When I went to Ethiopia in the Peace Corps, I discovered that sheep in the Middle East and Africa are comparatively shorthaired, and they are tended full-time by shepherds in unfenced areas of scrubby grass and thorny bushes.

While sheep are not as dumb as turkeys, they are not the brightest creatures, either. Sheep need care. When you hear or say Psalm 23, do you ever think about the hard work that the

shepherd undertakes? The shepherd has to find edible grass and a pool of water or at least a slow moving stream because sheep do not like to drink from fast moving brooks or rivers. The shepherd has to know where the next day's pasture and water are, and the shepherd must know the route to get there. The shepherd has to be prepared for accidents that can happen when the path gets narrow, especially if it is along a cliff, and for wild dogs, wolves, predators in the cat family. He is risking his own life. The shepherd has to be alert for poisonous plants, to dig them up and put them up on a rock up out of a sheep's reach. And when a sheep is injured, the shepherd anoints any cuts or scrapes to prevent infection.

The psalmist puts us in the role of the sheep, and in the psalm, we bask in the care of the good shepherd. The truth is that all human beings spend a lot of time being sheep, wanting someone to take care of us. Usually we think of our mothers as the ones who will see that our needs are met. No matter how old we get, we still want someone to mother us. I am reminded of this when Sharon looks at all the household things she has to do and wistfully says, "I need a mother." Now I know that she wishes her mother was still alive but what she really means is that she needs someone to fill the role of her mother and meet her needs. Moreover, at the same time she is saying this, I am thinking, "Me, too. I need a mother," and I don't really mean my mother in Delaware.

People in Seekers Church sometimes speak about our need to belong to a caring community, and I suspect that this really means a need to be a part of some community where people will take care of us, will meet our needs. We are sheep looking for good shepherds and the group of people who claim to be followers of the Good Shepherd seem like a likely place to find at least a few good shepherds.

Sometime in those weeks between Easter and Pentecost, the

disciples meditated on how Jesus had been their shepherd. They realized that Jesus had been called to fulfill the prophecy of Ezekiel:

For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

They realized that he had been trying to teach them how to shepherd each other and how to reach out to the lost sheep of Israel and bring them in.

Perhaps Peter grasped it first. When the resurrected Christ appeared to Peter by the Sea of Galilee, he asked, "Peter, do you love me? The Greek word for "love" here is "agape," which means the total, generous, self-giving love of God. Peter answers truthfully, "Lord, you know I love you; the Greek word for love here is "philia," which means the love one has for a brother or sister, the deep affection for a kinsman." Jesus replies, "Then feed my sheep," – those in the flock and those who are lost.

Every single person in Seekers Church is called to be a shepherd, and to find lost sheep. This is part of our tradition from the [Church of the Saviour](#). Last week in her sermon, Deborah spoke about call as a fundamental organizing principle for the Church of the Saviour. However, call was only one of several fundamental organizing principles.

The first fundamental organizing principle for the Church of the Saviour was a personal commitment to Christ. The title of Elizabeth O'Connor's first book about the Church of the Saviour was not "Call" but rather "The Call to Commitment." What did that mean? In the words of the Church of the Saviour membership commitment,

I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ, promising to give Him a practical priority in all the affairs of life. I will seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Those words "unreservedly and with abandon" could be huge obstacles when a person was in sponsorship for membership. But those words distinguish between the shepherd who is committed to the sheep to the point of laying down his life for them and the shepherd who is only a hired hand and who abandons the sheep when a predator comes.

The principle of commitment to Christ was intertwined with the principle of the integrity of membership. Before the Church of the Saviour was even formed, Gordon and Mary Cosby were determined that it would not be a church with nominal membership, where a person's name could appear on the roll of members but no one

could ever remember the person entering the church. A variety of mechanisms were used: preparation through the School of Christian Living, joining a mission group where spiritual disciplines, including weekly spiritual reports were practiced, intern membership, a lengthy and serious sponsorship process, annual silent retreats, and annual reflection about whether to recommit.

Another organizing principle of the Church of the Saviour was evangelism – to bring the whole world under the Lordship of Christ – to reach out to the lost sheep of the world. Again, in the words of the membership commitment:

I come today to join a local expression of the Church, which is the body of those on whom the call of God rests to witness to the grace and truth of God.

I recognize that the function of the Church is to glorify God in adoration and sacrificial service, and to be God's missionary to the world, bearing witness to God's redeeming grace in Christ Jesus.

Let us remember that this combination of organizing principles is our tradition from the Church of the Saviour. However, do we have the freedom to implement them in new ways? How do we bear witness to God's redeeming grace in Christ Jesus? By being good shepherds, loving others, especially those in need. As the lectionary epistle for today says,

We know what love is: that Christ laid down his life for us. And we in our turn are bound to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. But when a Christian who has enough to live on sees another in need but shuts up his or her heart against the needy one, how can we say that such a supposed Christian loves God? My children, love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine, and show itself in

action... This is God's command: to give our allegiance to Jesus Christ and love one another as he commanded. When we keep his commands we dwell in him and he dwells in us.

Now, Peter is not asked how he feels about the task of feeding Christ's sheep, whether it gives him joy or not. He is called to be a shepherd if he loves the Christ who has forgiven him, whose grace has given him new life. So are we. As Christians who have responded to God's grace by committing our lives and destinies to Christ, we are not free to reject Christ's call to love our brother and our sister. If we love the Christ who freed us into life, we are called to be shepherds of our brothers and sisters. Nevertheless, we are free to discern how we can best love them, how to live out that call. As Deborah said last week about call:

This is not to say that what we do out of call is always fun or easy – indeed, often it is difficult, dangerous, tedious, and heartbreaking, as well as keeping us from other things we would rather be doing. Rather, we feel a profound rightness, an inner knowledge that our task is blessed by God and that we bear the good news to others in our doing of it.

In my experience, Deborah has it exactly right – shepherding has a feeling of profound rightness and yet it is not always fun or easy. Not only is it sometimes difficult, dangerous, tedious, and heartbreaking, but we can feel inadequate as shepherds. I know that I am not very good at shepherding. Not only do I sometimes fail to feed the sheep in front of me – my family, my neighbors, my co-workers, you all – with words of hope and inspiration but sometimes I say and do things to make the sheep in my care hungrier for hope and inspiration. Unintentionally I say or do things at home, at work, in Learners and Teachers, in Stewards, or in the coffee hour that wound the sheep in my care. Sometimes I do not lead the sheep in my care down paths of righteousness, or protect them from

evil that I could deter. In the words that Ezekiel used to criticize the shepherds of Israel, I have “not encouraged the weary, tended the sick, bandaged the hurt, recovered the straggler, or searched for the lost.”

There is good news, a promise. When in a few minutes we eat this bread and drink this juice we are eating the body and drinking the blood of the Good Shepherd, we dare to proclaim that we are forgiven by God’s grace in Christ and we have been called to be shepherds of Christ’s sheep, and to do so in new ways. And by the power of His name, we are promised that we will become good shepherds, too, so that our psalm becomes:

I am a shepherd in the service of the Lord. The sheep in my care shall not want.

I make them to lie down in green pastures: I lead them beside the still waters.

Through my shepherding, the Lord restores their souls: I lead them in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.

Yea, though they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, they will fear no evil: for I am with them; my rod and my staff, comfort them.

I prepare a table before them in the presence of their enemies: I anoint their heads with oil; I fill their cups so that the water runs over.

Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow them all the days of their lives: and they will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.