

Years ago, parents of two Bethany 8th graders said to each other, “If my child gets out of line, I want you to tell me right away.” They knew that the world their children were growing up in was full of dangers and temptations that could lead them to lose their way, lead them to lose themselves. So, they turned to each other to share in guiding and protecting their children from those dangers. They shared a common purpose – helping to nurture each other’s children as Christians. They trusted each other to do that.

What they were doing was “shepherding,” guiding, protecting, nurturing, those who are vulnerable.

Shepherding goes way back in history, to when raising sheep was done in the midst of wild animals, and scarce food and water. Shepherds were the ones who guided and protected the flock. That’s why, when the people of Israel, experienced God’s care and guidance in the mists of danger - drought, famine, and marauding armies, they described their thought in terms of God shepherding them like a flock of sheep.

It starts with David, a shepherd boy, whose experience of great danger on the way to becoming king inspired the 23rd Psalm, with its image of peace and security in the midst of danger, affirming that our needs will be met, our spirit and strength restored, by a God who watches over us like a shepherd. God always leads us the right way. Even in great danger, we need not fear; God will be with us, to create peace, even provide a banquet in the midst of our enemies, and surround us with goodness and mercy.

No wonder the kings were supposed to “shepherd” the people, or that when they didn’t, God promised a Messiah, who’d truly “shepherd” them. No wonder when the Messiah was born, angels shared the news first with whom? A bunch of shepherds! Or, that when he grew up, he said “I am the Good shepherd.”

Who needs a shepherd? If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who are we? Well, we’re the woolly ones, the sheep! That’s tough to admit; being considered a sheep isn’t very flattering. So maybe the question shouldn’t be, “Who needs a shepherd?” but “Am I humble enough to consider myself a sheep?”

The Bible says we all need a shepherd. In fact, it says of the times when the people were shepherd-less, or resisted the one God sent, “Everyone did as was right in his own eyes!” We think our own eyes can tell us what’s right. They can’t! Selfishness, greed, laziness, lust, anger, jealousy, get in the way. That’s why the Bible says we need a shepherd, and membership in a flock, to help us see what’s right.

That also shows us that sheep aren’t as dumb as they’ve been portrayed; after all, at least they’re smart enough to know they can’t make it alone. They need someone to lead and guide them. Don’t we all? Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.”

They do because there’s a deep bond between sheep and shepherd. They’re like a family. They have a special way communicating. A good shepherd can distinguish a bleat of pain from one of pleasure. The sheep know that a certain call means food is available, and another that it’s time to go home.

When I was a child, my parents gave me freedom to play all over the neighborhood. I’d be in someone’s backyard; oblivious to time, and then, I’d hear, “STEPHEN! my little, 5 foot 4, mom, calling me home for supper. You know, that never embarrassed me; I went. It was a voice I trusted and readily followed.

The image of the Good Shepherd and the sheep is all about trust. It’s about being a member of a flock, a flock to which you belong, where you’re at home, know you have worth (as do the others) and where you’re safe and protected, a flock where you know you’ll be stopped if you’re headed toward danger.

That relationship isn’t just one of trust, but of being trusted, and being “trust-worthy.” It’s about being faithful to our responsibility not only to be sheep who hear the Shepherd’s voice, but also obey it, so we can be instruments of his shepherding love. For we’re not only the Shepherd’s flock, we’re his body, we’re those who do his work, we’re the one’s entrusted to shepherd the children baptized in his name.

It's a challenge for us as parents to honor those baptismal promises, promises that call us to work together, as a *faith* family to nurture them in faith, and to trust one another enough to do it!

That trust and common focus are becoming scarce! Talk to a child or youth about a behavior or attitude problem and you're as likely to have parents get angry about being "unfair" to them, or protest that "he's not a bad kid," as you are to find gratitude for trying to help the child see what's wrong. You don't have to be a "bad kid" to sometimes need correction and guidance. Yet, increasingly, parents resist hearing hard things about their children, make excuses for them when they do, point a finger at others "who are just as bad," or blame someone else. Or, if there need to be hard consequences, resent their child being deprived of something they feel is their due, and even undermine the discipline by providing their own "compensating" reward. It seems that the greatest concern is not about behavior that's dishonest, or hurtful, or denies their discipleship, but that that they might feel bad or miss something they'd like to do.

In a world that says, "don't hurt feelings" and "try to get and do all you can," we're called to embrace the firm side of shepherding, to have the courage to see that nurturing children means saying *no* as much as saying *yes*, requires a love that's both tough and tender, and is willing to teach hard lessons.

To have integrity as we seek to do that, to be worthy of the trust we need to share in nurturing our children, we as a church, need to be discerning as we seek to staff our ministry for young people with those who have the shepherding gift, the spirit, to teach, guide, protect, nurture, and care for them.

We need to see that witnessing to our faith to young people requires some basics -

- regular presence in worship, (because that time together is central to learning who we are as God's people)
- solid support for our ministry with children and youth,
- joyful, affirming interaction with them;

and in regard to youth,

- willingness to listen to them and respect for their views,
- support for their involvement in our mission, and welcoming, not resenting their sharing in it,
- belief that already, right now, they have gifts to share to help build us up as Christ's body.

These are some essential signs of the gift of a heart and a spirit for shepherding.

If, as Christ's body, we carry on his shepherding roll, especially with young people, we dare not avoid the challenges that go with it, tell ourselves they're "only kids," and allow fear of hurt feelings or conflict to keep us from dealing with situations where the shepherding attitude and spirit are lacking.

As I mentioned earlier, sheep are smarter than we've been given to think; at least they can recognize their shepherd's voice. Well, children are at least as smart as sheep; over time, they can tell if someone loves them or is out to control and dominate them. As the body of Christ, we want to be sure that what they experience, here in our midst, is the Good Shepherd, not a pretender with another agenda.

Jesus told us and modeled for us the best way to discern true shepherds from pretenders, when he said, "I am the good shepherd," and added, "I lay down my life for the sheep." And he did.

True shepherds suffer, often at the hands of their sheep, who want, as the Bible says, to "do what is right in their own eyes," resist or resent their shepherding, who pick at and undermine their efforts, or become mean and divisive. That's what happened to Jesus, those who followed and welcomed him on Palm Sunday turned on him a few days latter. It's easy to see why. The shepherd is always visible, easy to be sarcastic about, and vulnerable, having to make choices that are easy to criticize, lie about, or attribute false motives to. But a true shepherd bears all this, because he (or she) loves the flock. The Shepherd

sees the flock, not as a group to impress, or an arena in which to perform, but as a family to love. even to the point of suffering, and laying down his life, not only for them but, even, because of them.

There are other kinds of sacrifices that go with shepherding. One is to share a loved one who has special gifts for that ministry. It takes a giving heart to see that ministry isn't only what we do but what we enable others to do. That means not allowing but encouraging the one with that gift to share it. Our gift can be acceptance, encouragement, our way of ensuring the shepherding that's our shared responsibility.

Another challenge is to discipline ourselves and our children to be together enough to be a flock, to involve ourselves and our children in the church's life and ministry, in its nurture and fellowship. That means, at a minimum, witnessing to the importance of being here for both worship and Sunday school. Not to be says that the heart of our faith family's life is not worth the bother, that extra time in bed, catching up on work, recreation, or something else, is more valuable.

God calls us together, to be a faith family, a flock. Even sheep learn that they can't go it alone; we need to learn that, too. You can't be a solitary person of faith. Oh, you can try to justify it! You can tell yourself that you're too holy to be tainted by involvement in such a flawed bunch, that you're more spiritual than all of "them." But that separation, whatever our reason, is just another way of what the Bible called the opposite of faithful following, "doing what is right in our own eyes," another way of wandering away from where the Shepherd wants us to be, where we need to be - together with the flock, learning that we're no better than the rest of the sheep, and maybe have more to learn than most about humility.

We, Christ's flock are responsible to come together to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, to let him guide us as his flock, in his way, and then, through our faithful following, share in his shepherding work.

Why is this Psalm so precious? The image of the Good Shepherd so powerful? Why do we love this old song about shepherds and sheep, images so out of place today? Because it's an old song we need to sing anew. We need to hear it, not just with our ears, but our hearts, at the core of our being, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want," for it proclaims a deep trust at the heart of who we are as God's people.

A young couple was about to get married. They talked with their pastor about what scripture they'd like to have read at the wedding. "We'd like you to use the 23rd Psalm," they said. "The 23rd Psalm?" she asked. "That's fine, but it's usually read at funerals. Why do you want it at your wedding?" They said, "We are a little anxious. We know life together isn't going to be easy. We're committed, but we want to know the Lord is our shepherd who'll go with us, even when we walk through the difficult valleys."

Who needs a shepherd? I know I do. The promise that we don't have to go it alone is crucial in facing the challenges of our lives. What better way to be reminded of this truth than by singing the great hymn:

My Shepherd will supply my need; Jehovah is His name:
In pastures fresh he makes me feed, beside the living stream.
He brings my wandering spirit back, when I forsake His ways;
And leads me, for His mercy's sake, in paths of truth and grace.

Loving Good Shepherd, through all of the valleys of our lives
....in the rough places, the deserts, the mountaintops, the city streets
....we need not fear, for you are with us.

You have always cared for your people.
Even when we rebelled and turned against you;
....even when we said, "Who needs God?"

....We can take care of ourselves!" We'll do what's right in our own eyes!

Even when we found ourselves in places of hopelessness and despair, you have never given up on us.

You offer us living water, feed us, and satisfy the longings of our souls.

You sent Jesus to be a shepherd for us, to show us by his living, dying, and rising,
....that your goodness and mercy would follow us all our days.

Jesus is the living promise that we can dwell in your house forever.

We thank you for your wonderful love.

Help us to trust it.

Help us to share it.

Give us eyes to see you, ears to hear you, faith to follow you, courage to obey you,
....energy to stick with you, and gratitude that you have stuck with us.

Help us to be your flock, recognizing that we can not be your people alone, help not to feel superior,
....nor strive to separate ourselves, but trusting you, seeking to be obedient to you,
....help us to come together, to allow you to humble us,

....and teach us the patience and forgiveness that enable us to be a family.

Help us, as your flock, to share in your shepherding work with one another,
....especially with our children and youth.

Help us to recruit and encourage those with the special gifts for nurturing disciples.

Help us, to always make nurturing faithfulness, and expecting honesty and integrity,
....the focus of our nurturing of our children, as parents and as a church.

Help us not to protect or make excuses, or shift the blame,

....but be willing to hear the sometimes hard things we need to hear about our children,

....and to have the expectations, to set the boundaries, and require the consequences,

....that can help us better guide them as members of your flock.

As those who are grateful for your love and want to trust and share it,

....we pray for those with special places in our hearts,

....and the whole world which has a special place in yours.....