

April 30, 2017

Lesson 9: John 10: 1-15

God's Preserving Love

Context:

The Gospel reading this morning comes as part of a larger pericope, In chapter nine of the Gospel of John is the story of the blind man in the Temple. Jesus heals him and the healing shakes the community as people cannot believe that this is the same man who used to beg as people passed by him. The assumption by people recorded in the text was that some sin of this man or his parents had led to his being blind.

For Jesus, the moment is a teaching one about sin and about what he has come to do as the Messiah and the one who gives new sight so that people may see clearly. Of course his claim as the Son of God and the whole encounter cause people to be disgruntled and thus Jesus begins to teach. Which leads to our section today about Jesus as a shepherd.

Jesus was quite the teacher. He knew the right allusions to use to help people understand who he was and what he came to do. It might need a little explaining, but he could generally make his point. In an agricultural society like ancient Israel, everyone would have known that work of a shepherd, even the city slickers in Jerusalem.

In order to make his point about what he came there to do, Jesus talked about the role of the shepherd and how they handle the sheep. A thief or outlaw does not play by the rules and will barge in and snatch up a sheep. Whereas a shepherd goes into the pen, knows the distinctions of the sheep, and leads them in different places. When it comes to danger, the shepherd is invested even offering up his own life. Jesus makes the distinction about the hired hands who drop and flee at the sign of trouble. A shepherd will stay there and even combat a lone wolf who is out to get its prey. Jesus is that kind of shepherd. And thus he produces one of his famous "I Am" statements that tell the reader and those around him of his true identity. "I am the good shepherd."

For the Johannine community, this would have identified Jesus as one who was invested in their lives and as the one who came to give them truth. Believing in Jesus was something that gave hope. Jesus was distinguished from all the other competing leaders and other revolutionaries of the day. He wasn't one who didn't just come for their devotion or to use them for a political power. He came because he loved them and because he wanted to help them through their life.

Application:

For those who know their church tradition, the allusion of the shepherd is one that most people use for pastors and ministerial leadership. Those who have been entrusted with a flock are to provide and care for them. They are to know their people and to see what makes them tick and even give them prodding when need be. They are to protect them from the whims of the outside world and from those who would seek to destroy or hurt them. Their job is to love them and to help lead them in the direction in which they need to go.

But there is also a part on the sheep. Even though they may come across as animals that may not be the brightest and most clever, they are to listen to the shepherd. Even if the shepherd takes them into new territory or may take a strange path, the sheep is

to follow because that shepherd is truly thinking about what is best for the sheep. They have to listen to the voice of the shepherd and to trust that the shepherd will take care of them.

I cannot help but think of how often we need to learn to be like sheep who listen to others around us, especially those in positions of leadership in the church or those who are just plain wise. God is in the midst of those relationships and I think God gives us lots of different shepherds to help guide and direct us on the paths we need to go. There are lots of shepherds out there who want to help us in a world that can have a lot of thieves and wolves waiting to devour us.

Who are your shepherds? Earlier this week I had a conversation with a lay member of the church where I grew up. Usually every couple of months especially since I've returned to AWF, I'll give her a call. I tell her my news and I ask for direction on vocational matters, family matters, relationship matters, and the list goes on and on. While I've always had an independent spirit (which she noted I possessed as a child), she has always given me wise counsel and words to chew on to help me grow as a Christian and as an adult. She is a shepherd to me and it helps she has known me since I was six years old!

I even think about our new Bishop David Graves who has been proactive and so intentional about asking us to be in prayer and to focus on our mission, especially over controversial matters. As most of the churches may be discussing, people are awaiting the results of the Judicial Council about matters in the Western Jurisdiction. Some say that this will lead to a split in the church, with either verdict given. Caucus groups have already started advocating certain chapters to be formed in conferences to help prepare for the split.

And in the midst of it all, I cannot help but wonder if we are like the wandering sheep. Our leaders have asked us to do certain things. Things like to pray for the Council of Bishops and for the Commission on the Way Forward. Not to pray that someone "wins" and the other "loses," but to pray that God will help us in this time of discernment. Things like focusing on our mission and the ministries in our local churches. There are so many wonderful things the Lord is doing around us and is also inviting us to participate in. As I think of summer coming, I think of things like planning for elementary camps at Blue Lake, local and foreign mission trips, joint small churches Vacation Bible schools, and so many other things where the Lord may be calling us to be the hands and feet of Christ. Let us be Christ's sheep and may that be reflected in where we go and how we treat one another.

Rev. Evan Hunter Pugh
Verbena - Pleasant Hill UMC Charge

Verbena, AL
P.O. Box 7
Verbena, AL 36091
verbaumc@gmail.org

