

Good Shepherd – A Fresh Perspective

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I have shared more than once in worship that I am not a fan of the image of my faith journey as *God the shepherd*, and *I the sheep*. It has felt rather passive, that image of myself as sheep. But I'm here to tell you that I have also evolved in my opinion about sheep, and about the relationship between sheep and shepherd.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of an acquaintance who had actually grown up on a sheep ranch and could dispel the myth that sheep are dumb.¹ Her friend compares leading sheep to herding cattle. Cows are herded from the rear with shouts and prods. That does not work with sheep. If you stand behind sheep making noises, they will just run around behind you. While cows can be pushed, sheep must be led. Sheep will not go anywhere that someone else – their trusted shepherd – does not go first, to show them that everything is all right. Smart, right?

It is a relational image for God and Jesus, where God's children, like sheep, consider the Good Shepherd family. They even develop a language unique to their relationship. Theologian Sallie McFague points out this relational quality of this model of God.² Of course it is a model, a way of understanding God.

But with the scientific revolution, there emerged an image of God like a clockmaker – God creates the universe, then stands at a distance forevermore. This image of God the Shepherd and creation the sheep Reminds us of the power of relationship.

Another commentator³ reminds us, as we listen to today's Gospel story from John, that we are missing part of the story when we focus solely on Jesus referring to himself as the *Good Shepherd*.

John has a pattern of storytelling; first, Jesus performs a sign, then, Jesus offers a teaching about the meaning of that sign immediately after. To capture the whole story, we must go to the previous chapter, to the story of the man born blind, who hears Jesus, calls out to him, Jesus comes to him and performs the miracle of giving him sight for the first time. But that is not the end. The man, fresh from gaining his sight, is interrogated by the authorities, and he enthusiastically witnesses to the power of Jesus. As a consequence, the religious authorities throw him out of the community. But John carries on this story, where Jesus, hearing of the man's plight, goes to him, invites him to be part of The Way, the name for the Jesus Movement at that time. The Good Shepherd who will stop at nothing to care for, to find, to bring the sheep home.

Now, I am grieving as I scan today's news. I see people with great authority who do not care for those under their authority. Human machinations abound in our global neighbourhood. I continue to see clergy in other Christian denominations who have caused so much pain, not at all caring for the faithful. Church administrators in those

¹ From the sermon by Barbara Brown Taylor entitled "The Voice of the Shepherd." Reference by Nancy R. Blakely, *Feasting the on the Word*, Yr. B, Vol, 2; p. 450.

² Models of God. Sallie McFague. © 1987, PRINT ON DEMAND.

³ Commentary on John 10:11-18, April 21, 2024. Dr. Karoline Lewis. workingpreacher.org

traditions repeatedly block the justice system from holding the faith leaders accountable, and so the victims' healing processes are hindered.

I could despair at these signs around me in the world. Anything, it seems at times, but signs of the spirit of good shepherds alive in our world today. But here is the thing. God is not at all absent from our world. The problem is, there is just a din of voices – of rogues, of scam artists, and bullies – all pretending to have solutions that will “save” us. But we, like sheep, are not so dumb.

We do, however, have to listen, for the shepherd's call. If we listen amid the chaos and noise, and pain, the Good Shepherd's voice is gentle: the *shepherd* speaks not of quick fixes, but instead of the long and often arduous road toward healing relationships; the *shepherd* does not relish power and conquest, but instead wins hearts through tenacious and unconditional love.

What if we take that image of tenacious love and care of the shepherd more seriously in our life and faith. Can we live out that courageous spirit of love and care for neighbour in our words and actions with one another?

I'm surprising myself today, affirming the metaphor of the God like a shepherd, and you and me, like sheep. We need models of God that might help us to navigate through our traumas, our pitfalls, and especially those figurative cliffsides of life on which we find ourselves. Let us remember, though, that sheep are smart. Yes, they are stubborn, independent-minded, and they do need to listen for the clarion voice ahead of them. So do we.

The Moderator of the United Church of Canada, Carmen Lansdowne, shares her sense of despair at times watching the news of yet more deaths of Palestinians, senseless and innocent deaths, after the senseless deaths of innocent Israelis last October. It is a legacy of violence that has cycled for over 70 years. Our Moderator invites us to accompany the people of Palestine and Israel, by making a pilgrimage for a ceasefire in Gaza. She asks us to walk, or to wear white and post on social media, to walk all at once or in small segments, in twos or threes or larger groups – walk 41 kilometres, the length of the Gaza Strip. If you have Facebook, there is a link on the St. Andrew's United Church Sudbury Facebook page with all the information you need.⁴ Our Moderator offers this prayer:

As relentless as the rising sun, may we, steadfast God, pray relentlessly, until the violence, war, and bloodshed in Gaza ends. Give us the fortitude to pray, without ceasing, until the safety, well-being and dignity of all people is cherished and held as sacred; and until elected officials and those in positions of power safeguard the most vulnerable and protect the human rights. Give us the courage to pray boldly with our hearts, our words, our actions, and our resources until all people in Palestine and Israel can enjoy freedom, justice, and peace in abundance.

May it be so, Amen.

⁴ For more information, in your browser type in “united church of canada” and “gaza ceasefire what you can do”. Or click on this link. <https://united-church.ca/news/gaza-ceasefire-what-you-can-do#msdynttrid=dFriKYoSAYMC0l6BqGqO131Z851YmdJWjHQgQwCK70>