

Four Sunday of Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church,
Houston, TX
5/3/2020

John 10:1-10

Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter we celebrate the Feast of the Good Shepherd and we read from the Gospel of John, Chapter 10. In year "A" we read verses 1-10, year "B" verses 11-18, and in year "C" verses 22-30. In the first ten verses Jesus makes a comparison between good shepherds and thieves and bandits. The shepherd enters through the gate, but thieves climb in another way. The shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out to be fed. He goes ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. Thieves and strangers, on the other hand, don't know the sheep, and the sheep will not follow them because they don't know him.

This figure of speech, as John calls this parable, gives us valuable information on leadership. And, it seems as though everyone is talking about leadership now a days. What is it about leadership that is so important? This is a good question. Many of us are willing to follow a leader to the end, often relocating to faraway places to work or study under a particular person. We consider ourselves blessed when we have the fortune to work for a good leader, and cursed when we work for an ineffective or abusive leader. Most of us who exercise leadership attempt daily to become the leaders we admire. We seek to imitate their qualities, model our behaviors after theirs, learn from the decisions they have made, and shape our world in the same way they have shaped theirs.

Leadership is very important and following the right leader is even more important. Today Jesus talks openly, yet in parables, about the traits of a good leader. But before we talk about the Good Shepherd, let us talk briefly about a few examples given to us by scripture about not-so-good shepherds. Every time I come to John 10, I think of Jeremiah 23:1-2 and Ezekiel 34. Jeremiah 23:1-2 says, "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord." Then in Ezekiel 34, the prophet criticizes the rulers of Israel for feeding on the sheep, failing to protect them, and scattering them. He says, "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."

These passages are important because in Chapter 9:40, after the episode of the healing of a blind man, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and accuses them of spiritual blindness. These Pharisees who were part of the ruling class and leaders of the people had failed in many ways to protect the sheep, worrying more about blind obedience to rules than on the welfare of those entrusted to them. I believe the Good Shepherd narrative is a continuation of this critique, which compares these pharisees with the evil Shepherds of Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Jesus uses the agrarian images of the day to talk about leadership. This is what he says: ***A Good leader enters the sheepfold by the gate.*** He does not climb walls, break-in, cut corners, or enter the sheep pen by any other means than the gate. He has the authority and the right to enter through the gate. This is his pen and the sheep are his. He is not a hired hand, nor is he a thief. He enters through the gate even if entering by the gate places his life in danger, even if “doing the right thing” sets him apart from the evil culture of the day, even if entering by the gate requires him to become incarnate into human form and as frail and vulnerable as human shepherds. The Good Shepherd, the good leader, will enter through the front gate, with authority, with courage, and with decisiveness. This is a challenge for many church leaders today that seek to lead the easy way -by avoiding conflict, sacrifice, and decision-making.

A Good leader is recognized by his sheep. The sheep hear his voice and recognize him immediately. They know his voice and feel safe in his presence. The sheep know because of prior experience that when the shepherd is with them there is safety, green pastures, plenty of water, and rest. They know he would give up his life for them because he loves each and everyone of them. Perhaps more important than the sheep knowing the shepherd is the fact that the shepherd knows them. He *“calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”* He has taken the time to learn their names, he has developed a relationship with each of them, and he cares for each individually. To him each sheep is unique and special. No sheep is more important than another, worthy of better food or more protection, or loved more. All his sheep share in the same love and protection, and all are invited to enter into a deep relationship with the shepherd. The shepherd gives himself up to the sheep and for the sake of the sheep.

Ultimately, this is the greatest gift the Shepherd gives them. He gives his own self for them! Here we find another lesson for church leaders. Many of us seek to lead our churches into more and more programs, sophisticated fellowship opportunities, and exciting learning courses, and all of these offerings are appropriate and welcome. But, we often forget that Christianity is much more than a set of programs, or even a well-defined liturgy. Christianity is a relationship with a person. It is ultimately a relationship with Christ. A church leader who does not give Christ to his people, is not faithful to the

commission given them by God himself. People need Christ! Without Christ there is no church. Without Christ all we have left is a well-defined social club for people who think and look like we do.

A good Leader leads by example. The Good Shepherd “*goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.*” Jesus’ model of leadership is “Servant Ministry,” and this can be seen in the fact that he goes ahead of the sheep. Being in front requires that the leader be willing to take risks, deal with conflict and dangers, find the best places for feeding, find the more secure routes, etc. The front position is the position of danger, as anyone who has served in the armed forces will tell you. The good leader does not hide in the back of the pack, passing the risk on to others. They lead the charge, set the course, and walk the walk they ask others to walk. This is another great challenge for church leaders. Many of us have a prescription for everyone, yet many of us fail to apply that prescription to our own lives. Hypocrisy is a pastor’s biggest temptation and enemy. It is likewise a temptation for all of us who are leaders in this congregation.

A good leader has the best interest of the sheep at heart. The Gospel today continues, “*He leads them to green pastures because he came so that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” The Good leader seeks to promote the wellbeing of the sheep he leads. Following the shepherd becomes profitable for the sheep, as they know they will be taken care of, they will have abundance of life. The Good Shepherd is himself “the way, the truth, and the life” and the sheep are given life abundant. There is a reward given to the sheep that goes beyond immediate protection. They are given life! We see another example here for church leaders to follow. Many of us hold on to power to such a degree that we stifle the leadership potential and abilities of the faithful. “Father knows best” is a great temptation for pastors and church leaders. We forget that the responsibility to lead others to Christ, and to make him known, falls on all of us as Christians. This is our Baptismal vocation. Pastors must equip, empower, and commission others to exercise leadership within our churches.

Today, Jesus gives us a roadmap to follow not just in our churches, but also in our lives, as many of us are leaders in our jobs or fields. I want to end by emphasizing a point I made earlier. The main gift the Shepherd gives the sheep is the gift of himself. Likewise, the main gift we have today to give a hurting world is the gift of the Son of God, the Savior of the World. Without him, nothing we do here week after week makes much sense.

May God make you gift-givers today, that others may come to know his Son and may come to recognize him as the Good Shepherd. Amen!