

**Uniquely Jesus: Uniquely Shepherd | Pentecost 14 | Luke 15:1-10**  
Pastor Nick Shults | St. Mark Lutheran Church | Sunnyvale, CA

*Jesus is our faithful shepherd who pursues us, tends to our wounds, and celebrates our return and repentance! May we continually place our trust in Jesus as their shepherd through this life.*

### **Introduction**

We don't often consider the vocation of shepherd in the modern world. Sure shepherds make their obligatory appearance at Christmas time and perhaps when we make a trek into the country and see fields filled with cattle or sheep. Of course, pastors are often referred to as shepherds...as even in the name we hear vestiges of the grazing life. But it's not too often that we find ourselves running into a shepherd.

Of course the Bible is replete with shepherd imagery. We think immediately of Psalm 23. We spoke the words from Isaiah in our confession and absolution. Our OT reading for today from Ezekiel is a wonderful image of a shepherd. Jesus, of course, gives us occasion to think about the implications of being sheep in his flock as, in the Gospel of John, he calls himself the Good Shepherd. But even with all of this biblical imagery, we don't often think too long or hard about shepherds.

But maybe we should be thinking a little more deeply and a little more carefully about those shepherds who might be seeking to influence our lives. Maybe we should be thinking a little more deeply and who and what influences us and cares for us...or purports to care for us, and who and what leads us and guides us through this thing we call life.

Jen and I finished watching a documentary the other day called *The Great Hack*...it's about a company called Cambridge Analytica, a company that collects data from many different sources and uses it to influence people and their actions. First, they used it as defense contractors, working with the military and intelligence agencies to see, for example, how they might deter young men in Afghanistan from *not* joining Al-Qaeda. And then, famously, or infamously, they were the company behind the digital marketing for the Brexit campaign in the UK and then other American political campaigns as well.

You see, we are all being influenced. The makers of the documentary were trying to influence me. Online or in person, we are all being led and guided by forces outside of ourselves. We are all being shepherded. The questions for us to consider this morning is this: "Who is our shepherd?" Who is the shepherd we are allowing to lead and guide our lives? And, do these shepherds have our best interests in mind? Are these shepherds *for us* or are they simply using us?

So this morning we're going to take a look at our options when it comes to the shepherds in our lives and based on both our OT and Gospel text we'll see who Jesus is and how he goes about his role as shepherd.

We'll then explore the other options as we compare and contrast. But as we do, we'll see that this Jesus, whom the scriptures show to be our *good* shepherd does three things:

- 1) Pursues us Relentlessly.
- 2) Tends our Wounds Carefully.
- 3) Celebrates our return Joyfully.

### **We Have a Shepherd: Who Searches for us Relentlessly**

Right off the bat in our text this morning, Luke sets us up to draw a comparison. His comparison, as we see, is between two kinds of shepherds: the Pharisees and Scribes over and against Jesus. We read:

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

Over the last three weeks we have encountered some difficult teachings of Jesus about the narrow door, about humility and seeing the world through God's eyes, and last week about the cost of discipleships. These have been some difficult and challenging teaches from Jesus but his call has, it seems, some unexpected results. Jesus calls his hearers to a life of radical discipleship and what happens? The (so-called) dregs of society show up. (of course we know them to be the ones who are exalted in the kingdom of heaven).

Tax collectors and sinners turn out in droves to follow Jesus and listen to him teach. Tax collectors, of course, those who had cheated their own people out of money in the name of the Roman empire...people who had aligned themselves with the Roman occupying force. Sinners...this seems to be a catch-all term for those that first-century Jewish society labeled as sinful. Perhaps there were prostitutes, perhaps there were ones who didn't always make it to the synagogue on the sabbath. Perhaps there were ones who had cheated on their spouses, who were liars, who were murderers, gossips, slanderers.

These were the ones responding to Jesus. And our text says that Jesus "welcomed" them or "received" them. Perhaps it was that Jesus hosted them at meals in the houses of others. He welcomed them in, he reclined at the table with them, they shared a meal together. This was, of course, no small deal. One biblical scholar notes the importance of table fellowship in the ancient world and even now in the middle east:

*"...to invite a [person] to a meal was an honour. It was an offer of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness; in short, sharing a table meant sharing life... Thus Jesus' meals with the [tax collectors] and sinners...are an expression of the mission and message of Jesus..."<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeremais, *Parables, 100* quoted in Bailey, Kenneth E. 1983. *Poet & peasant ; and, Through peasant eyes: a literary-cultural approach to the parables in Luke*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 142-143.

Indeed tax collectors and sinners supposedly brought, not honor, but *dishonor*. Tax collectors and sinners weren't meant to share life together with a respected rabbi. They were to be held at arm's length. One piece of early rabbinic writing even states that a person of the upper class could, of course, feed the poor (ie give them food) but could not actually dine with them. That act would be too intimate.

So what Jesus is doing is unscrupulous. If he's really a rabbi...more than that, if he's really the Son of God, God's Anointed One, certainly he wouldn't welcome into table fellowship with him *tax collectors and sinners*. Nevertheless, there He is, associating himself with the lowest of the low. Eating with those he ought not. Celebrating life with ones who had cheated and lied and stolen and failed to obey the Torah of YHWH. There is Jesus, living out his mission to seek and save those who are lost.

And there are the Pharisees. Standing outside the party, arms crossed, scowling, and grumbling. And there are the scribes, refusing to enter into fellowship with the Lord of Life, sensibilities offended, complaining. Grumbling and complaining. It sounds less fun than eating, doesn't it?

But for Jesus, this is the purpose of the incarnation. This is the purpose for which God made himself flesh, "...was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and was born of the virgin Mary". The purpose of the incarnation was to pursue us sinful human beings, to draw us closer to himself, to bring us back into the fold. As the parable demonstrates, Jesus leaves the 99 to in search of even just one who is lost. Jesus goes in search of the one coin. That one son who has wandered off and made terrible decisions.

Jesus, in His incarnation, searches for us relentlessly. He searches for each and every one of us. He makes no distinction between rich or poor, white or black, upper class, lower class, have's, have not's. Every one is one whom Jesus pursues.

But make no mistake. There other shepherds and influencers in this world who are pursuing us relentlessly as well. There are those who desire to affect the way we think and act in order to benefit financially or by gaining power and *more* influence for themselves. They pursue us whether we're driving down the road, watching TV, or using an app on our phones.

They pursue us relentlessly. Their teachings ring in our ears. But not so that we will have life. They pursue us relentlessly in order to sow seeds of discord in our country. They pursue us relentlessly to make it seem like we don't have enough or aren't enough. They pursue us relentlessly to make it seem as though God isn't the final answer to all things. They preach that Jesus can't save you...only you can save you.

They pursue us relentlessly not to give to us...not to feed us with good things like Jesus does. But to feed us with evil things and to draw us away from our true shepherd. Only Jesus pursues us in order to bring us to everlasting life.

We have a shepherd that pursues us relentlessly.

### **We Have a Shepherd Who Tends to Our Wounds Carefully**

Ezekiel 34 tells us that God, who is our shepherd, not only will he seek the lost and bring back the strayed, but he will also bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. Our shepherd tends to our wounds *carefully*.

Many of the shepherds and influencers, those who want to lead us away from God, they play off our wounds, play off our biases and desires. They play off our insecurities and exploit them. Why? Because they want to sell us their products. They want us to act in a certain way or believe a certain thing.

See, the Christian faith, as much as we believe certain things (ie the Creed...these are really important things because they happen to be true!!!), as much as our faith is about believing these certain things, day-to-day, it's even more about *trusting* in our shepherd. This is why Psalm 23 never goes out of style at a funeral. In these moments of deep woundedness, we have to fall back on our trust in the shepherd who cares for us, who leads us, who walks with us through the darkest valleys.

We all carry around these wounds. Wounds from our childhood, wounds from our adolescence, wounds from a bad relationship, wounds of illness, wounds from the loss of a loved one, wounds from the guilt and shame we've been carrying around since Friday, or last Friday or last year or the last decade. We all, each and every one of us carry around these wounds simply from living in a world that beats us up. Just living in a broken, sinful world makes deep gashes in our souls.

But our Christian faith is about trusting in our Shepherd who tends to these wounds *carefully* and lovingly. Trusting in this shepherd to cleanse them, to bandage us, and to walk with us, steadily, faithfully, through the healing process.

Let's be honest, the Christian church has earned a reputation not exactly of of being healers, but being a group of people who pour salt in the wounds of the world. Of sticking our thumbs in people's sores. Of simply ignoring the wounded at our front door because it's inconvenient or uncomfortable. We, along with the shepherds of our world, have failed to tend to these wounds of the world.

But our shepherd tends to them continuously...

How does he tend to our wounds? He tends to them through His Word and through the message of the Gospel. The death and resurrection of Jesus is Gospel, Good News, precisely because it attends to our wounds, our hurts, our sin, our guilt, our shame. It's Good News because it's a healing balm applied by our Lord to each of our cuts and sores.

For those who have been cast aside, forgotten about or ignored, we hear the Good News that Jesus welcomes all into table fellowship with him. He would leave the 99 for

just one who was cast off! For those who are burdened with shame or guilt, we hear that Jesus welcomes you, too. He applies the salve of forgiveness and grace. He takes your sin, he takes your burden and carries it himself so you don't have to. The death and resurrection of Jesus is Good News because it's living proof that he binds you up by the unconditional love he has for you as a member of His flock.

For those who have been wounded by death or impending death, Jesus binds you up through the promise of his resurrection. The beautiful promise that, because he lives again, so too will you. So too will your loved ones who are in Christ. You see? The Gospel of Jesus binds up all of our wounds. And that Gospel is heard through His Word. And though we are certainly imperfect at it, Christ also calls us to bring this same healing to the world through the actions of His Church.

Earlier this week Rev. Geta stopped by the church office. Rev. Geta works for Bethesda Lutheran Communities...Good Shepherd Homes merged with Bethesda a number of years ago...he shared with me the story of Alana who has cerebral palsy. Upon coming to Bethesda she had never been inside a church before. However, she was welcomed in with open arms to Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, IN.

Alana, who faces many challenges, was surrounded by a congregation who loved her and shared with her God's Word. She was baptized at Bethlehem and, after a lengthy 4 ½ year individual confirmation process she was confirmed at Bethlehem as well.

Through this community in Indiana, Alana was given healing and wholeness. The church could not address her physical wounds but they shared with her the good news of the Gospel, and by welcoming her in, demonstrated that Jesus welcomes all to him. And in doing so, she was given the opportunity to confess her faith in the relentless, healing love of God in Jesus.

We have a shepherd who tends our wounds carefully.

### **We Have a Shepherd Who Celebrates our Return Joyfully**

The Pharisees grumbled as Jesus welcomed sinners and tax collectors into table fellowship. But the parable Jesus tells shows us a different picture of our heavenly Father. Recall from our text that Jesus tells of the shepherd who goes and find the sheep...the woman who searches out the lost coin...that when the shepherd find the lost sheep and the woman finds the lost coin, immediately following finding these things there is a celebration! The shepherd throws a party for the recovery of his lost sheep! The woman throws a party for her lost coin!

What's interesting to ponder is whether or not a celebration for a lost sheep might actually include the slaughter of a lamb. It's interesting to think about whether or not the celebration the woman throws with her neighbors might have cost her more than the coin was worth in the first place. But that's kind of the point.

The point is that the celebration of our heavenly father is above and beyond. It's a celebration that goes beyond what we might expect for *ourselves*, for those whom we might not value as God does. But we have a shepherd who celebrates joyfully when each and everyone of us returns from the dangers of the wilderness.

Mike Yaconelli is widely considered to be the father or one of the co-fathers of modern youth ministry. He was one of the first to create resources for youth ministry, to equip those in the church who spent their time ministering to youth. He was one of the first to bring church youth workers together for learning and encouragement. Yaconelli has since passed away but he was incredible at celebrating when Jesus found the lost, healed the wounded, or made the dead live again.

He tells a story of a church member complaining that a group of middle schoolers were sitting on the church lawn smoking and reading the Bible. "Can you believe," the church member asked incredulously, "that they were *smoking*?! What are we going to do about this?" To which Yaconelli responded, "They were smoking *and* reading the Bible? WOOHOO!!"

Yaconelli was passionate about sharing the Gospel with middle school and high school students and loved celebrating when God brought his sheep home. The Jones Memorial Carpet got worn out in two years because people were using it? Woohoo! The youth minister got in trouble because students were playing hide and seek in the organ pipes? Woohoo!

Students were engaged in the body of Christ! They were hearing the gospel! They were being loved by their shepherd Jesus through dedicated adults who invested in them. Woohoo! For Yaconelli, this was something to celebrate!

You and I, we were brought back from death in our sin to life with Christ. That's something our heavenly Father celebrates! In the kingdom of God, no one is standing outside the party, arms folded and a scowl on their face because the wrong kind of people are inside. No way. In the kingdom of God all those who have faith in Jesus are inside, celebrating with their shepherd because the lost have been found and the dead are alive.

## **Conclusion**

There are many people, many organizations, many ideas, many things that are vying for our attention. They long to be that which leads and guides us. But there is only One who longs to be in relationship with us, who longs to bring us healing and wholeness to our hurt and pain, only one who longs to celebrate our entrance into his Kingdom. And that's Jesus.

Jesus, our shepherd, pursues us relentlessly.

Jesus, our shepherd, tends to our wounds carefully.

Jesus, our shepherd, celebrates our return joyfully.

Amen.