

Proper 11 B 2018

July 22, 2018 :: All Readings for the Day

Fr. Jim Cook

“The Ministry of Presence.”

In our reading from Mark’s gospel, Jesus seems to be at the apex of his popularity, because people are coming out of the woodwork to see him. In fact, our reading describes how people “rushed about that whole region” to bring the sick to wherever they heard that Jesus was. That’s popular! But Jesus doesn’t resent their attention, or their demands on his time and energy. Rather, “he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

You know, in those days, the term “shepherd” was used to describe the King of Israel. And that was a practice that went back hundreds of years. And in many places throughout the Old Testament, Israel’s kings were described as shepherds; the people were the sheep; the nation was his flock. And the shepherd’s job description was really quite simple: attend to the various needs of his people.

And so, when Jesus describes the people who were coming to him as being like “sheep without a shepherd,” he’s saying that the then King of Israel, Herod, wasn’t doing a very good job as shepherd.

And that takes me to our reading from Jeremiah. That reading is the end of a much longer section where Jeremiah has been lambasting the previous few kings of Israel in particular, and corrupt monarchs in general. And the charge that Jeremiah brings before those kings is that they “have not attended” to the needs of the people.

And at the end of that reading, God promises to raise up a righteous shepherd, “and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

And so, the people of Israel, both in the time of Jeremiah, as well as in the time of Jesus, had been suffering under the mal-administrations of unrighteous and unscrupulous leaders. But God promises a new king. A new shepherd. A *good* shepherd.

And that takes us to our reading from Psalm 23, where we're given a description of a good shepherd, of a good king, of an ideal leader.

Now, the really interesting thing about Psalm 23 is that it has an intentional structure to it. It's not just a stream-of-consciousness poem or hymn. It's layout is deliberate. And without boring you with details about all that, I will tell you that, at the exact middle of this psalm is where we find these words: "for you are with me." And we know that's the exact middle of the psalm because, in the original Hebrew version of it, there are exactly 26 Hebrew words before that phrase, and exactly 26 Hebrew words after it.

Now, you may be wondering: Why do we care where the exact middle of the psalm is? I'll tell you. It's because that's where the author puts the most important stuff.

Think about this: the author has written this psalm to describe the ideal shepherd, and he's basing it on his own relationship with God. And

from that experience, he has come to realize that the most important attribute of his relationship with God — and, therefore, the most important attribute of an ideal leader, or a good shepherd — is expressed by the words “for you are with me.”

And by putting 26 words before it and after it, the author is saying “for you are with me” *always*. Because $26+26=52$, the number of weeks in a year. In other words, “you are with me” *every week of the year*. The psalmist is telling us that the most important attribute of a good shepherd is *presence*; “for you are with me”; you are present with me, all of the time.

I call that the ministry of presence, and it’s really important. Let me give you two examples of why it’s so important.

Back when I was in seminary, I served for a summer as a hospital chaplain. Late one night, I received a call informing me that a patient on the oncology ward had asked to see the chaplain. And so, I went to the man’s room and I introduced

myself. At first I said some prayers with him, but then I sat by his bed, and I listened as he talked. And he talked a lot. He told me that his children lived far away and couldn't visit him very often, and that made him feel sad. But also, that his wife wasn't coping well with his terminal condition, and stayed away most of the time. And that made him feel lonely. In the end, I did nothing extraordinary; I just sat with him, and I listened to him. And that was enough.

Several years ago, in Kansas, the husband of a parishioner was in the hospital, dying. He was alive, but only technically; his body was on life-support. When the decision was made to "pull the plug," I went to the hospital to sit vigil with the wife. Again, I said a few prayers, but then I just sat with the wife as the life-support was disconnected. And as we waited for the end to come, I listened to her stories about him, and their life together. Again, I did nothing extraordinary; I sat with her, and I listened to you. And that was enough.

Those two stories — those two events — never fail to remind me of just how important is the ministry of presence. And whenever I read Psalm 23, I'm also reminded that the most important attribute of a good shepherd is presence. And being present with someone really can be the most powerful ministry that *anyone* can undertake.

But here's the thing: it doesn't take a seminary education to be good at it. It just takes patience, and a willingness to sit with someone who may be going through a tough time. And if you've ever done that — if you ever sat with someone who was hurting, or alone, or grieving — then you were being a good shepherd to that person. And good for you!

Now, and according to Psalm 23, there are lots of other things that good shepherds do for people in need: like, providing nourishment, or shelter, or security. And, make no mistake, those can be really important for people who don't have those things. But they're not nearly as important as simply being with someone.

This is a lesson I have to learn over and over again, but I really shouldn't need to.

Because I've been married long enough to know that, whenever Peggy has a problem, and she's telling me about it, she doesn't need or want me to fix it for her. She's more than able to do that for herself. Rather, she simply wants me to listen to her. She wants to know that I support her. She wants to know that I understand what she's going through. She wants to know that I'm with her in it.

And, I've been around enough 12-step programs throughout my ministry, to know that it works. And not because the people who attend are able to fix each other. But rather, because the people who attend are offering their ears, and their hearts, and their support. The people who attend are doing the ministry of presence.

God has called all of us to be shepherds for those around us — whether friend or stranger. And sometimes it may mean that we help to provide things like nourishment, or shelter, or security to

those in need of such things. But sometimes, it may mean that we help them by simply spending time with them, by listening to them, by hearing them, by supporting them, and loving them, and being present with them. To do for others, in other words, just as God has done for us.

And so, I want to end with this thought:

As God as nourished you,
may you provide
nourishment to others.

As God has provided shelter
and security for you, may
you do the same for others.

And as God has been present
with you, in good times and
bad, may your presence
bring comfort, peace, and
hope to others.

Amen.