

## Feed My Sheep

Sometimes things come together in such a way that I believe has to be God speaking.

First, this last week I finally dug into a book I started then let languish as other things crowded in. It's called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by African American theologian James Cone.

The gist of the book is the connection between the cross and suffering of Jesus and the suffering and murder of African Americans in this country following the Civil War through the Jim Crow years. It's classic theology of the cross lived out in the lives of black Americans.

In the book, there's a chapter devoted to Martin Luther King, Jr. and his vision of God's Beloved Community...a community of black, brown, and white people living in harmony with God and each other.

Then, the devotional readings that I get each day from Father Richard Rohr have been about community all week, and yesterday's was also about Martin Luther King Jr. and the beloved community. Rohr talked about African spirituality and the concept of Ubuntu.

Roughly translated, Ubuntu means I am because we are. In essence, it means that individuals cannot become fully who we are created to be in the absence of beloved community.

Then, in the last few days, the country became aware of the murder of a young black man, Ahmuad Arbery, in Georgia. He was chased down and killed when he went for his morning run in a white neighborhood and two white men deemed him suspicious looking. There may have been no noose involved, but it was a lynching.

All of this is over the backdrop of a pandemic which is severely testing the balance of freedom against the desire for the common good which has always been a stress point in our very individualistic culture. Conspiracy theories designed to discredit scientific leaders have reared up on social media. Anger over restrictions has even grown violent in a handful of cases.

Bubbling through all of that for me has been this week's passage. Feed my sheep...tend my sheep...

This is often called the reinstatement of Peter. Remember, during Jesus' trial, Peter huddled around a charcoal fire in the high priest's courtyard. Three times he denied being a follower of Jesus.

Now, three times, Jesus asks him Peter do you love me? Feed my sheep...Peter do you love me?....tend my sheep.

And a 3<sup>rd</sup> time, Peter do you love me? Hurt that Jesus had to ask so many times, Peter says, Lord you know that I do.

Then Feed my sheep.

This is often interpreted as Jesus forgiving Peter for his denial. There may be an element of that, but this goes even deeper...it goes down into Peter's very identity...his understanding of who he is.

See in John's gospel, the question asked of Peter in that cold, scary courtyard was "You aren't one of this man's disciples, are you?"

Three times Peter replied, I am not. I was not with him.

Over three years with Jesus, Peter's formation as a disciple had begun. During those years, Peter's very identity was being transformed. Yet... in a moment shrouded in fear and uncertainty, Peter denied being a disciple of Jesus. Three times, he said I am not his disciple and I was not with him.

Now around another charcoal fire on a beach in Galilee, three times he declares his love for Jesus. And three times, Jesus tells him what it will mean to be his disciple. It will mean Take care of my sheep. Love them as I do.

The image of a shepherd caring for his sheep is a powerful one in scripture. Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. Now he is handing the role of shepherd to Peter. But it's not just Peter who is called to take over that role.

Being a disciple of Jesus means tending his sheep, wherever you find yourself. We often think of pastors as being shepherds. But in our understanding of church, we are all disciples and we are all called to ministry. We share in that call of feeding and caring for one another and for all God's people. We are called to be that Beloved Community Martin Luther King Jr dreamed of.

So what does being a shepherd look like? Here, Jesus says...feed my sheep...tend my sheep

Here is what Jesus said earlier in the book about being a good shepherd.

Jesus said "I am the good shepherd. The shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The hired hand, who is not the **shepherd** and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

I am the good **shepherd**. I know my own and my own know me,

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one **shepherd**.

Jesus the good shepherd draws us all together into one flock...one Beloved Community of all races, nationalities, orientations, and abilities. And we in the church are called to tend that flock. And that inevitably means taking up our own cross...sacrificing for the sake of the beloved community. Sometimes even one's life.

In the passage, Jesus tells Peter that is exactly what will happen to him. In fact by the time John's gospel was written down, it probably already had.

In our current situation, there are lots of opportunities for us to lay aside our own desires for the sake of others. I recognize that there have been protests in various places about the restrictions...about infringement of rights.

But what I see more is a willingness on the part of most people to lay aside their rights and do what's needed to protect lives.

I see people in health care and hospital work and others who care for the sick literally putting their lives on the line.

For most of us, being a shepherd right now doesn't look much like we thought it would – staying home as much as possible, wearing a mask when you can't be sure of maintaining 6 feet of separation, staying connected with people as much as possible, supporting businesses and people that have been hit hard.

Community doesn't just disappear because we can't be physically together and we are now called to be community in a very different way.

Tending God's community right now also means not being too ready to jump to easy solutions. We live in a society that too often offers stark either/or choices. Too much of the noise on social media and elsewhere presents us with false either or choices – either you stay home and ignore the economic impact or you protest and demand the economy reopen, lives be damned.

This is a false either/or. Tending God's beloved community means caring both about people's physical lives and their economic well-being...and understanding that there's a lot of gray here and any easy pat answer probably is wrong.

And tending to God's beloved community means remembering that there were things not right in our communities before all this happened. Those things haven't gone away. A health care system too dependent on employment, educational disparities, massive financial inequality, racial injustice...those things haven't gone away.

We might hope for a better world after this is over, but actually making that a reality will mean facing some unpleasant truths about our society...places of brokenness that the pandemic is shining a light on... things we might be tempted to think are better left in the dark.

For Peter, his denial was about his very identity. He denied who he was called to be...he denied who Jesus called him and equipped him to be. Gently, Jesus let him reclaim that identity as a disciple and then made it clear what kind of disciple Jesus needs him to be.

Jesus gives us our identity, too. Jesus tells us that our identity as disciples means we too are called to tend God's sheep...to work with God toward that beloved community in which we all live in peace with God and with each other.

And Jesus also makes it clear that in some form or another that will likely mean laying down our lives...or our rights...or our comfort...for the sake of others.

We do so remembering that that's exactly what Jesus, the great shepherd of all us sheep, did for us.