

SERMON for Sunday, July 23, 2006
 Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 23
 Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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Who Cares?

Lots of sheep and shepherds in the Scriptures today, familiar ideas and images that we know and some of us as children have memorized, which are favored and familiar passages of comfort. But few of us know much about sheep, and even if we have once upon a time been around them, or taken care of them, can't begin to comprehend, in a true way, what the image of shepherd was in the terrain and crags and deserts of the Middle East. In fact, all we know now of the Middle East are pictures of the horrible violence, the distrust, the bombs, the endless diplomatic posturing, the groups that promote terror and hate. It is hard to imagine shepherds there. Who cares? Who cares about shepherds at all?

If God is our shepherd, then what is God like? A leader, according to the prophet Jeremiah, who will gather the scattered people of God, who will bring them together, who will form them into a group of followers. A leader, according to the prophet Jeremiah, who will be just and will demonstrate righteousness, who will bring peace. And a Lord who is shepherd will be, according to the psalmist David, a protector, a guide, a presence in the time of trouble, a shelter. And Jesus saw those who came after him, those who raced around the lake to greet him on the other side, those who were desperately ill and needed healing, those who were hungry for words of hope, sheep who needed a leader, a leader who would touch, who would speak words that would bring wholeness and health.

We all seek after a shepherd God. We long for someone to take care of us, to put our well-being first, to hold us up when we stumble in life and are ready to fall, to protect us from the dangers and pitfalls, sometimes of our own making. We seek comfort, we seek refuge, we seek...we are always seeking, all of us of every age and place in life. We want to make sense out of tragedy and death, we want to have purpose and meaning in our work and play, we want to not worry about the future. A shepherd would be nice, we think. But in our darker moments, when loneliness sets in, when financial concerns occupy us, when treasured relationships fall apart, when our bodies become diseased and aged, when the world even seems as if it falling apart into violence, we wonder. Who cares? Who cares about me? You know the answer of course, *The Lord is my shepherd...I shall not want.*

Popular author Kathleen Norris, an active Protestant churchwoman, recounts her experiences living within a Benedictine monastery in her book *The Cloister Walk*. She writes, *For a long time I had no idea why I was so attracted to the Benedictines, why I keep returning to their choirs. Now I believe it's because of the hospitality so vast that it invites all present into communal lectio, a hospitality so vast that it invites all present into communion with the text being read. I encounter there not a God who rejects me because I can't pass some dogmatic litmus test but one who invites me...* What Kathleen Norris has discovered is the great *Who cares?* And it is not only God but the welcome of God's people, in this case the Catholic communities who follow the rule of St. Benedict, who exhibit the greatest Christian virtue, the most important of Christian commandments, that of hospitality. God shepherds us by the hospitality, the acceptance, the welcome, the company of the Christian community.

Christian hospitality can be quite simple and direct: a cup of cold water, the food offered after a funeral, the outstretched hand to the visitor, a phone call or note. And most of us would say, *Of course!* But in the rush of the day, in the middle of our own worries, we can overlook the smallest acts, and overlook someone scurrying away from our house of hope and hospitality, saying, *Who cares?* You know how it is – each one of us does, for we do it to one another. Not intentionally, but routinely. Is there anyone who today, will leave this place and mutter, *Who cares? Who cares whether I am here or not, who cares that I am lonely, who cares that I carry burdens that are just about to do me in?*

And Christian hospitality goes far beyond a nice welcome at the door. In a multicultural, pluralistic society like that of the United States, how we live in respect and with honor for those of faith traditions different from our own become complicated. Tom Reynolds, professor of Religious Studies at St. Norbert College in DePere, Wisconsin, studied and wrote about a real situation of Christian hospitality in a small Wisconsin town. You may remember reading about this in the paper, and the controversy that ensued. A well-known and respected Jewish man died, and the family wished to have the funeral in a local house of worship, but the community was small and did not include any synagogues. All the local churches contacted refused the request but one, which just happened to be Presbyterian. Members of this congregation chose to support this man's family and his contribution to the community. The issue, which quickly became divisive, and made headlines everywhere, was that when the family's rabbi came to town and looked at the sanctuary, he asked if the prominent cross at the front of the chancel could be covered out of respect for Judaism. The members of the congregation's leadership group, the session, met and decided to honor the request. As you can imagine, many disagreed with this action. Some thought that the main symbol of this Christian church should not be covered, for after all, the rabbi and the Jewish family were guests, and should accommodate to the beliefs of the host. Others were equally adamant that the cross as a symbol of resurrection of Christ would be an offense to the ones who were to be welcomed. I remember reading about this, and having my own questions and doubts about their action, and wondered what I would do in this situation, one of great complexity. We could spend hours talking and examining this issue, and perhaps we should in another type of forum other than a sermon. But I would like to share with you the essence of what Professor Reynolds says about Christian hospitality.

He says, *The first step toward brokering peace and reconciliation between religious differences is hospitality. Hospitality welcomes the stranger as one worthy of being considered a household member, marking a willingness to make room for another's unique presence. At stake is far more than the superficial civility or niceness that is commonly mistaken for hospitality...it creates space for identifying with and receiving the stranger as oneself, it is what we share in common...we recognize and empathize with the stranger as someone not entirely different from ourselves.* Who cares about world peace? Those who offer hospitality in the name of the Shepherd of all. And he writes, *As Christ welcomes, so he calls his followers to welcome others. In turn, by receiving others, Christ's followers receive God's blessing. Welcome leads to welcome, leading to further acts of welcome. Being a follower of Christ, then, means to be taken up into the circle of God's hospitality, which spills outward toward others in the shape of a radically welcoming and inclusive community symbolized by an open table fellowship... The embrace of God knows no predictable limitations. It overflows all conventions and human standards. God's affirmation of humanity is a*

Yes that welcomes and accepts all. Who cares about strangers and immigrants and the ones who are not like us? If we have been welcomed by Christ, then we do.

I must tell you that as I was thinking earlier this week about this One we call Shepherd, I had thought mostly of comfort and the embrace of God's love, of being welcomed into the fold. After all, such a warmth is harder and harder to find in a society where we are numbers and barcodes rather than names, where we live in the isolation of our private homes and fenced yards, where we can slide into our car that is in the garage, drive through at the pharmacy, drive through at the bank, drive through at the post office, drive through at the restaurant to pick up food, drive home again into our garage and never speak to a human being except through a speaker. In his book of social commentary, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures, how in the last twenty-five years 58 percent fewer people attend some kind of club meeting, 33 percent fewer eat family dinners, and 45 percent fewer have friends over. The title comes from the statistic that more people are bowling in recent years, but not in leagues. They bowl alone. That's right, we think, at the end of the day, who cares? No wonder our favorite psalm, with good reason, is the Twenty-Third, *The Lord is my shepherd...*

But as I read more and more about Christian hospitality I was challenged. I was challenged by the concept of such caring for others that not only changes them, but changes me, changes my outlook, my opinions, my own understanding of how God's love heals and saves. Episcopalian priest Jackie Bernacchi writes, *Now, brace yourself, because this true Christian hospitality calls for deeper commitment still. To be hospitable may mean putting your own needs on hold to help another, or even sacrificing for another's welfare or care. It may mean bending group membership rules a bit, so a fellow human can take part, thus feeling accepted. Further, it suggests a sort of generosity that goes way beyond lending a pal a couple of bucks; it asks for significant giving without the specter of payback. It asks us to fight our personal prejudices without regard to race, creed, gender, politics, sexual orientation and more, in order to see the Christ in everyone.* True Christian hospitality follows the Good Shepherd, who not only offered cool water but laid down his life.

The question, my friends, remains. Who cares? Who cares for the children who will be baptized today, and who cares for the children who scrape food out of garbage cans? Who cares for the newcomer who may be sitting among us, and who cares for the ones who have so felt the sting of hate that they won't even come near? Who cares for you when you are in need of comfort and assurance, and who cares for the ones who are so desperate they cannot even hope? Who cares?

And the benediction from the 13th chapter of the book of Hebrews: *May the God of Peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make us complete in everything good so that we may do his will, working among us all that is pleasing in God's sight. Amen.*