

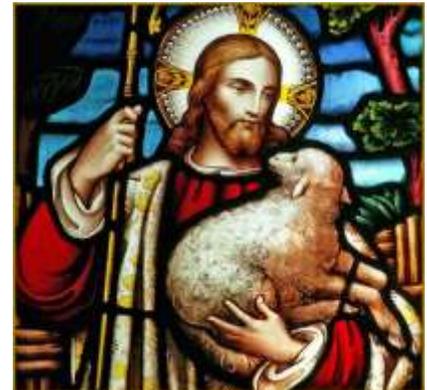
The “trouble” with today’s lessons is that they ALL lead to politics. (You have been warned!) Today we have a choice:

- There’s the Spirit-filled early Christian church where love abounded and people sold their possessions to care for those in need. OK, but today 19 percent of all people in our country are disabled and in need. Ut oh!
- There’s the exhortation to endure pain while suffering injustice. OK, until we realize this lesson is urging slaves to submit to their masters, even when treated badly while being enslaved. Ut oh!
- Then there’s our gospel lesson, where Jesus is not-so-subtly chastising Israel’s leaders for being **bad leaders**. Ut oh again!

Most of the time we preachers duck the political. If we are lucky, as our seminarian was three years ago when I palmed these lessons off on him, it was Mothers’ Day! But not today. Today we head right for the **bad leaders**.

So here we are, with Jesus after he had healed a blind man on the Sabbath. This was our lesson way back on March 26. The Pharisees’ hearts were so hardened against Jesus that they had banished the formerly blind man from the Temple and were plotting Jesus’ death. Today’s lesson is the same day, same people.

And clearly Jesus wasn’t happy. He let the Pharisees “have it.” We don’t know his tone of voice, his facial expressions, or his gestures. But he had some harsh things to say in response to the injustice of their actions against the now-sighted man. The familiar “take away” from today’s gospel lesson is that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and yes, he is! But this wasn’t Jesus’ point, really. Jesus used scripture to instruct Israel’s bad leaders what good leaders should be.



*Good Shepherd 53 by "Waiting for the Word" on Flickr, used under CC BY 2.0*

A very old Babylonian proverb says, “A people without a king [a leader, is like] a sheep without a shepherd.” We also find this proverb in Numbers (27:17) when Moses asked God for a successor so that the people wouldn’t be like “sheep without a shepherd.” The Old Testament calls Israel’s kings “shepherds.” Scripture also calls the prophets shepherds (in fact, many of the prophets actually WERE shepherds). But the theology of the Old Testament is that God himself is the ultimate shepherd. We celebrate this theology every time we

say or sing the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, as we did today. In the Old Testament, the Lord God himself was the shepherd of Israel.

In our country we don't have a lot of cultural experience with shepherds. We might not know that shepherds walk ahead of the sheep and guide them past dangers. The goal is to eventually shear them of their wool, a kind of service to the sheep. Good shepherds love their sheep, good shepherds call each of their sheep by name, and lead, guide, feed, anoint, and sometimes carry their sheep to safety.

Ezekiel chapter 34 tells us the difference between good shepherds and bad ones. Bad shepherds use the sheep for their own purposes, slaughtering them at will and using the sheep for food rather than feeding THEM, and pilfering their wool prematurely for their own purposes.

In our country we have more history with cowboys than with shepherds. A cowboy rides a horse alongside the cattle, driving them to be slaughtered. So the cowboy names his horse, not his cattle. Like the bad shepherd, the cowboy feeds on the cattle along the drive and clothes himself in cattle hide, as well. Perhaps cowboys, not shepherds, are our American model for leadership, for politicians.

At their worst politicians consult a poll to see where the people are headed and try to rush out ahead and pretend they're leading. At their worst, they treat people like cattle, disappearing regularly and reappearing richer, hoping we won't notice. At their worst, they don't seem to care if everyone makes the journey safely. In fact, they may think the whole would be better off without the older, weaker, and sicker among us.

If you think I'm exaggerating here are two extreme examples from elsewhere. In the Netherlands, a country with universal health care, euthanasia of severely ill newborns has become not exactly commonplace, but routine. And in the Philippines almost 6,000 addicts or drug dealers described by their president as "no longer viable as human beings" have been murdered.

The Good News is this. Jeremiah says that God is against bad shepherds, bad leaders, and has determined to rescue "his sheep" himself. God has promised that he himself will shepherd his sheep. In fact, the Lord has vowed to destroy bad shepherds by "feeding them with justice."

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus says he, himself, is the good shepherd. He didn't start there, though. First he said he was the gate or the door to the sheepfold. The Pharisees didn't

understand this metaphor other than to realize that Jesus was calling them “thieves and bandits.” They would have been even more furious if they had understood what he meant.

We don’t understand Jesus as the door very well, either. We have turned Jesus into an exclusionary gatekeeper, which is absolutely NOT gospel. Jesus didn’t name himself as the gate to keep people in or out, but to protect them from wolves and false shepherds, to protect them from cowboys and bad politicians. And we now understand a deeper meaning in the door metaphor: Jesus’ blood is smeared all over the doorframe, the sign of eternal life to those who pass through the door that is Jesus, just as on the very first Passover when the angel of death passed by those with blood smeared on their doors.

When the Pharisees didn’t understand this metaphor, Jesus shifted gears and explained another way, using another image, “I am the good shepherd.” Here Jesus was contrasting his relationship with us who are the sheep, and their relationship with the sheep. Christ Jesus will strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, find the strays, seek the lost, and feed us justice rather than feed on us unjustly. THIS the Pharisees did get, and they weren’t happy at all.

Before we leave BAD shepherds, I want to make clear that I am NOT being one-sided in my politics today. Are shepherds who would abandon or feed on one-half of the flock any worse than shepherds who would sell the birthright for three coming generations rather than admit we are living well beyond our means and adjust our lifestyle accordingly?

Good shepherds exist in the political arena. We get the leaders we elect. Maybe we ALL of every political party are using the wrong criteria for our electing!

Having bad shepherds doesn’t let us sheep off the hook, by the way. Having bad shepherds doesn’t allow us to be bad sheep. We each are responsible for knowing and following the voice of the good shepherd. And we are each responsible to the other sheep for not preventing them from obtaining access to the basic necessities of life. But this is another sermon. God will judge us sheep—as he will judge shepherds (and cowboys and politicians and all leaders)—based on how we treat each other.