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16th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—CYCLE B

Common thread: Leaders often devour their followers. As our Good Shepherd, Jesus gathers scattered sheep and teaches disciples how to unify and stabilize communities.

GATHERING SHEEP FOR A FEAST

The Text: Jer. 23:1-6; Ps. 23:1-3a, 3b-4, 5, 6 (1); Eph. 2:13-18; Jn. 10:27; Mk. 6:30-34

In the ancient world, shepherds had a few primary responsibilities: counting the sheep, rescuing the ones that got away, protecting the innocent, and reimbursing the damages from lost ones. The job seemed so simple, yet it was so difficult.

Israel's shepherd leaders had a similarly yet straightforward job description. According to Jeremiah, they were to treat the people like lost sheep. They were to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind the injured, bring back the strayed, seek the lost, and rule them lovingly. Much to Jeremiah's dismay, their leaders devoured their flocks. They literally "ate their own" and scattered the sheep they were meant to assemble.

Like sheep, people tend to reflect the character of their leaders. People can be just as hateful (or pleasurable) to one another as wicked leaders are to them. A similar thing happened among people in Ephesus. Scattered people erected dividing walls to prevent each other from coming back together. Their sin and fractured relationships divide them from each other, pushing them farther away.

Did you feel a similar tension in your family? Have you had that experience in your neighborhood? The people we should be able to associate with, now we don't understand. Especially in the last four years, those we were once closest to are now distances.

These issues remind us why we still need the healing touch of a good shepherd. We love it when Jesus feeds the multitudes, meets our prayer requests, and supplies our needs. Before he can do that, he must do the prior work that only a Good Shepherd can do; he must gather the sheep for a feast. Through his superpower of reconciliation and compassion, he does just that.

In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus teaches the disciples who he is, what his character is like, and how they can reflect that character with others. To enjoy this feast, he must break down walls that prevent the people from coming. He does so through sacrifice. His blood not only covers a multitude of sins but also **builds bridges between me and you**. He puts our hostility toward one another to death and brings peace through people who were once divided.

Then a second thing happens. He doesn't just leave us where we are, but **he shows compassion to the scattered flock**. Mark tells us that one of Jesus' superpowers we have access to is the power of compassion. We literally (in the Greek) feel compassion in our guts. Our stomachs churn when we see the division and hatred in our world. People are drawn into Jesus' teaching ministry because of how much pity he took on them. They are attracted to his empathy for their issues and his ability to listen to their challenges. He saw even his enemies as his friends.

As the church, we are called to be shepherds to the scattered sheep of our world. Before we can teach and feed them, we must reassemble them through the power of peaceful healing and compassionate care. We follow Jesus' lead and reflect his role as shepherd. We sit down with and among the people we are divided against. We go to the sheep in remote and isolated places and sit with them.

According to Mark 6:30, Jesus places the disciples among the people he feeds. He seats them in groups of 50 and 100, like a giant "symposia symposia." (The words are repeated in Greek). They sit with the scattered sheep and show them Jesus' compassion. It's not a perfect process, but their kindness is contagious. Compassion ripples through a community. The church then becomes the stabilizing force in a community when everyone else is scattering.

What would that look like in action? Consider, for instance, a group of missionaries in Algeria featured in the 2010 film "Of Gods and Men." In 1996, eight Cistercian Trappist Monks faced an incredible choice in the Atlas Mountains of Algeria. As missionaries to this mountainous region of Algeria, they had chosen a rural life as many monks do, to live as witnesses in and among primarily Muslim people as they cared for the poor and the sick, operated a health clinic, raised honeybees, and lived their faith. As their leader, Brother Christian, said, "We are here to be brothers in love to everyone."

They were an integral part of their community. They attended community events, worked in the community, and welcomed anyone. Simultaneously, their country faced similar problems as many other Arab countries did in the 1990s with Muslim terrorists. The monks faced a terrible choice: to stay or go. With pressure politically and religiously, they would vote every six months to decide their fate. As the terrorists grew closer to the monastery, their fate was almost decided for them. On Christmas Eve 1995, the terrorist group came to raid their supplies of prescription medication but instead was thwarted by the leader's words of peace. Later, the terrorists returned to receive medical care from the monks.

When the monks met with the local villagers about leaving, the villagers asked the missionaries to stay. The monks described their existence as birds about to decide whether to fly to another branch. "No, the village elder said, we are the birds; you are the branches."

The monks voted unanimously to stay. Eventually, seven of them died, and two lived. Their leader said, "Each of us was called to be here with these people. We did not come to be protected by an army; the Good Shepherd doesn't abandon his flock to the wolves."

The one stabilizing force that held the community together was the Christians. If the Christians became divided, did not seek the Lord, and gave up their daily rituals, work, worship, and service, the whole community would fall apart, and arguably, it did.

Jesus invites us today to go out to the remote regions of our community, where people have been scattered, and he treats them the way he sees them—as sheep without a shepherd. There, he prepares a feast in the presence of our enemies. There, he will be our Shepherd.