

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/September 11, 2016

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I visited the ancient city of Caesarea Maritima on one of my trips to Israel. It was a beautiful day on the Mediterranean. There is a gleaming white, stone statue of the Good Shepherd, the lamb curled tightly about his shoulders. It is a reproduction. The original, ancient statue is now at the Vatican. Today we have lots of depictions of Jesus. In the earliest centuries this was not the case. To represent Jesus, one carved the good shepherd.

This ancient understanding of Jesus got me thinking about the burden of our mission as Christians, each one of us, to carry people back to unity with God and each other, which is where we all belong though sometimes we lose our way.

Last year an estimated million people were displaced by violence in Central America. Many try to make their way to this country which has become part of our national debate. It is not a situation about which we can be indifferent. What is the burden of our mission to care for people who have had to flee their homes? Next Sunday afternoon at 3, Noah Bullock, Director of Cristosal in El Salvador will speak at Saint Paul's about what is driving violence and migration in Central America's Northern Triangle – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Here is one instance in which a family was carried to safety.

A mother with two daughters, one of whom is disabled, had found some success as an entrepreneur and community leader in El Salvador. The mother's achievement brought her to the attention of gang members who began to extort "renta" or money from her. When she could no longer pay the fees, "she fled to another part of the country. The gangs found her there and continued to threaten her so she moved again. And again." Finally, she hid herself and

daughters in the home of a family member. She could no longer go out to work or seek medical help for her daughter. The frightened family came to the attention of Cristosal, a Christian mission, which carried them to safety in El Salvador so that healthcare institutions there could care for the daughter and guarantee the family's security.

The good shepherd lays the sheep on his shoulders and rejoices. The burden of carrying another to safety is hard work but it is joyful work. What makes the story even more powerful is that the Apostle Paul describes himself as "a man of violence." Did he have something in common with the Central American gangs? Violence is not the way of Jesus. Today is the 15th anniversary of 9/11. Violence is not the way of Allah or God. One day Paul said, "the grace of our Lord overflowed for me," carried me. The good shepherd laid him as a burden upon his shoulders and brought him to where he became a person of faith and love. That too is hard work and it is joyful work. Paul is a prototype that it is possible for persons of violence to change.

Still, it is easy for us to lose our way. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, we can all from time to time find ourselves making golden calves to worship – easy money, power over others not with others, indifference to those in need, self-absorption. The things we serve have a way of controlling our lives. Only God is different because serving God, who is love, is perfect freedom. God carries us. God's grace overflows for us.

Moses takes upon himself the burden of carrying his people lost in the sparkling gold that entices them. They have disowned God, and God would like to disown them! God calls these lost souls "Your people," not mine. But Moses carries himself with his people before God. He reminds God that they are most especially God's people. Watch how when God gets furious, Moses gets curious. "Why God does your wrath burn hot...? Why should the Egyptians get the last word that the God of Israel only wanted to kill his people in the mountains?" God is reminded of that steadfast faithfulness that began with Abraham and continues day after day to the end of the age. It is God's nature to counter faithlessness with faithfulness. God's grace overflows. God carries us.

Sometimes we don't realize how lost we are. The Pharisees coveted their position as insiders and dissociated themselves from those they considered outsiders. It's like how we divide ourselves into groups. We can even do this in the church. We take our identity from who we are not. We are not like those others, we say with some pride. And along comes Jesus who embraces everyone. All are one. "There is one Body and one Spirit," as we say at baptism, "One God and Father of all." We are all part of a unity. Are we offended at this? The Pharisees were. They grumbled, "This fellow Jesus welcomes those who are way outside our comfort zone. He welcomes sinners and eats with them." In the ancient world to share a table and eat with another conveys honor and acceptance, peace and trust. Jesus is eating with the wrong people, with outsiders. No wonder the Pharisees are offended. It injures their identity.

Then Jesus does a thought experiment with them. He calls it a parable. Imagine, he says to the Pharisees, that you are a shepherd, or a woman. These are categories of persons without power or status in Jesus' day. Already you can imagine the Pharisees upset at this comparison of them to these obviously inferior others. Again they grumble.

So you lose a sheep. Which one of you would not go after it? You lose a coin and you're poor. Your house has no windows and is dark. Who wouldn't sweep the floor, and hearing the coin clink, wouldn't stoop down to pick it up? Then Jesus contrasts the Pharisees grumbling with the joy of discovery: the joy of shepherd and sheep returning safely; the celebration over what was lost being recovered. When we are divided and do not realize how lost we are, Jesus' mission is to bring us home, into one fold, a wide open unity. As followers of Jesus our mission is to carry one another by God's grace to where each one is accepted, where division, violence, extortion are no more, but life, healing, and security. It is hard work and joyful work. It is a heavy burden and a joyful one.

The earliest depiction of Jesus is as the good shepherd. He seeks us when we have lost our way. Like a shepherd with a lost sheep he carries us to where we belong. Like a woman with a lost coin he stoops to pick us up. We may not even realize how lost we are. God's grace overwhelms us. We may have

disowned God, like the Israelites, like the prodigal son his father. God's faithfulness is extravagant. So what is the burden of our mission? Paul says: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Stoop to pick one another up. Carry one another as we are able. The joy of the resulting fellowship and peace is out of all proportion to what we expect. "Friends and neighbors," Jesus says, "rejoice with me."

Amen.