

April 21, 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Meditation: “Who are ewe?”

A few short weeks ago he was a lamb who died in the effort to reconcile human beings and God. A lamb isn't the only metaphor used to describe Jesus. He has also been called the true vine, the bread of life, living water, the gate or door (depending which translation you read), the way, and today, the good shepherd. Can you think of any others?

It ought to be obvious that all of these references are metaphorical. Metaphors are great at revealing a truth that we have difficulty putting into words. And, they have limits. As the gate, or door, Jesus represents an access point to God, but he was not made of rough-hewn planks, nor did he have a wooden expression. As a lamb, the priests, who were vested in the sacrificial system of the temple, saw Jesus as a live, unblemished offering who died to atone for human sin, but Mary didn't have a little lamb in the stable.

How is Jesus like a vine, or bread, or a highway, or living water?

How is Jesus like a shepherd?

There is one other thing that we can say about the image of Jesus as a shepherd. In a word, relationship. The shepherd is in relationship with the sheep.

A week ago, I read a book called “Canoeing the Mountains,” written by a Presbyterian minister in the USA by the name of Tod Bolsinger. He uses the mission of American explorers Lewis and Clark as a way of talking about the church in our time. Lewis and Clark were commissioned by Thomas Jefferson, who was President of the US at the time, to find a water route to the Pacific.

They, and a company of others, set off by canoe up the Missouri River. In due course, they reached the source of the Missouri River, on the east side of the Rocky Mountains. At that point, they realized that people of European descent had been wrong in assuming that there was a water route to the Pacific.

People of European descent had been wrong in assuming that the landscape in the west would be the same as the landscape in the east. There was no water route to the Pacific.

They had to decide between returning to Washington DC and reporting that their mission had been a failure or looking again at the mission and its objectives from a different perspective. They were explorers, and the exploration was worthwhile in and of itself. So, they decided to keep going until they got to the Pacific, but they weren't going to get through the mountains by canoe. They needed to leave the canoes behind and find horses.... and a guide.

Likewise, Bolsinger says, the church is looking at a landscape that is radically different than what we experienced in the past. The way we got to where we are will not work to carry us forward into the future. No amount of tinkering with worship styles, or introducing rock bands, or anything else that we've ever tried in the past is going to carry us into the future. We can't canoe across mountains. Technical leadership is not what the church needs right now, argues Bolsinger. What it needs is adaptive leadership.

Technical leadership involves solving technical challenges with known solutions. You identify the problem, identify a solution, and then implement the solution.

Adaptive leadership involves confronting the status quo to change behaviours and practices and ways of doing things to which people are deeply committed. Adaptive leadership involves, as Bolsinger puts it, 'disappointing your people at a rate that they can absorb it.'

It involves admitting that you don't know what the destination is when you set off, and, yet, knowing that you cannot stay where you are, just like Abram and Sarai when they left Haran for the land that God promised them.

It involves sticking with a plan through attempts to sabotage the process, just like David after Samuel anointed him when Saul was still king. More than once Saul attempted to kill David to prevent him from becoming king.

It involves doing things in ways that have never been done before. The example Bolsinger uses is when Lewis and Clark reach the Pacific coast just as winter is about to set in, and there were two opinions in the group. One opinion was that they should set up camp at the shore. The other opinion was that they should set up camp a short distance from the shore, within the

protective cover of the forest. What these two military men did was totally unprecedented. Over two hundred years ago, they held a vote. And not only that, but Clark's black slave and their guide, a young indigenous mother, were also allowed to vote.

It involves seeing that the attacks are not personal attacks aimed at the leader, rather they are attempts to avoid change and the loss of what is familiar, and possibly cherished. Remember Jesus' words, "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

To lead a group through the process of adaptive change requires, above all else, a strong relationship between the leader and the group – between the shepherd and the flock.

It also means not changing the core mission of the group. Lewis and Clark were explorers looking for a way to the Pacific. All of this is to say that, no matter what, the mission trumps everything else – traditions, practices, behaviours, and the like. And that means that everyone has to be crystal clear on what the mission of the group or organization is.

Bolsinger talks about how to develop or express a mission statement. The first thing he says is that the shorter, the better. Eight words, maximum. The second thing is that there needs to be three things in the statement – a verb, a subject towards which the action is directed, and an outcome. Here are a few examples.

This is where things get exciting. I'm assigning homework to each and every one of you. I want you to take some time this week to write, in a dozen words or less, what you believe the purpose of this congregation is. Remember, include a verb, a subject, and an outcome. Bring your mission statement with you next week, or email it to me by next Sunday. I'll collect them all, read them all, and share insights the following Sunday. And everything remains confidential – I won't say that Joe Smith said he thinks our mission is entertaining bored people so they feel excited to be alive. Why, some of you may even be interested in reading the book and holding a study. Let me know.

In the meantime, it is enough to know that no matter where we find ourselves, no matter what the circumstances are, no matter the threats we find ourselves faced with, the Good Shepherd is there with us, to guide us, to protect us, and to lead us, because the Good Shepherd has a relationship with the flock, the Good Shepherd cares for the flock. Thanks be to God.