

This Sunday is famously known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”. There is always a reading or two that refers to Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In the gospel of John, the Temple authorities are trying to goad Jesus into making a clear statement that he is the Messiah. This is taking place during the celebration commemorating Hanukkah – the event when the Jews reclaimed authority over the Temple in Jerusalem.

His answer wasn’t the crystal-clear response they wanted. However, anyone familiar with Hebrew literature would get the point. Shepherds were metaphors for kings. King David was a shepherd after all. But, Jesus had a different type of kingship in mind.

Kings have subjects. The Good Shepherd has followers.

Subjects obey commands. Sheep hear the voice of the one who cares for them.

Subjects live and die at the whims of earthly rulers.

The Good Shepherd uses his staff to direct and keep safe those in his fold.

Keeping the fold together requires listening, patience, and experiencing each other day to day.

The Good Shepherd uses the crook to rescue those who find themselves on a precipice. The Good Shepherd uses the blunt end to move wandering sheep back to the pathway on which they travel.

The sheep have work to do too. They need to be so familiar with the Shepherd that they need only hear his voice to know to come to him, to go where he directs. That level of familiarity requires months of togetherness. To know someone's voice means that you must stay close and listen intently. If you go off the path, you might not only lose your way but also forget what that voice sounds like.

I need to confess that I've felt a bit "off the path" lately. I've been stuck. As a matter of fact, if we hadn't moved things around in here I would still be stuck.

The discomfort I feel about the new arrangement, along with the thrill of adventure, helped me look at things a new way.

Prior to Easter, though, I really didn't know where I was going in ministry. The ideas I had had bore no fruit. Most importantly – I wasn't having any fun. For decades, my personal motto has been "If I'm not having fun, I'm not doing it right." Somehow, I'd gotten off the path.

So what was I doing wrong?

At last week's clergy conference, Nancy Beach from the Unstuck Church Group suggested that, instead of whatever title we used in our jobs, we should consider a new one: CSO – Chief Spiritual Officer. She suggested this in the context of describing how we get distracted from our real call because the roof is leaking or the toilet's backed up. Or, there are a myriad of administrative duties we need to take care of because we don't have the budget to hire enough staff or.....well, you get the picture. Nancy nailed it. I'd lost my vision for what God called me to be. It's not that I'm not good at the other stuff, it's that it's become my primary role.

It's time to change that.

It's time for me to reconnect with the Good Shepherd. It's time to reconnect with my ordination vows. It's time for me to get back on the path that Jesus asked me to walk with you.

I'm here, first and foremost, to be your Chief Spiritual Officer. I'm here to help you develop your relationship with God in Christ. Crafting good liturgy with the staff and others is only one part of that charge. Creating programs and classes trying to provide pathways for education and Christian formation haven't been well received. I thought that was what you wanted. I thought that was what Jesus wanted.

I've come to the realization that what Jesus wants is more time with us.

Four years ago this week, I was installed as your rector. My friend and mentor, the Rev'd Stephen Smith said this at that service:

“I have watched her preach, teach and care for parishioners for years and I know what she does best is help people ask questions, wonder, think and reflect on reality in new ways that come from the very depths of their connection with God. And when we do that the connection made between the pulpit, altar, and everyday life comes alive.”

What I do best is help people ask questions, wonder, think and reflect on reality in new ways that come from the very depths of their connection with God. I help people see the link between Sunday morning and Monday morning. I want to do what I do best with you.

We provide a place to worship God in the beauty of holiness. There's no need to change that. Yet, there is more to what church community should offer than a quiet place to retreat to on a weekend. If there isn't, then let's we could just give this all up and go to the beach!

The Incarnate Word of God wants to transform us.... transform us individually and collectively into our best selves. Baptism isn't something to check off in a person's life, it's Christ's invitation to new life. The Eucharist is not just a lovely ceremony that we participate in to make us feel better. It's also a kick-in-the-pants for us live a Christ-like life.

Life in Christian community should challenge us as much as it consoles us. It should hold all of us accountable to our baptismal vows. It should encourage us to take the relationship with Christ seriously so that we can change the world.

As your Chief Spiritual Officer, I believe Jesus is telling us that if we take care of our relationship with Him first, the other things will be taken care of too. In addition to offering a place of respite, we must offer the only thing we have that no one else is able to: a deep, transformative, and engaging relationship with God in Christ.

Therefore, I am going to do my best to stop worrying about our Average Sunday Attendance. (I'm still going to list it in This Week at Redeemer because I think may reveal what I'm about here.) My energy, my focus, is going to be about having conversations with you and for you – the kind of conversations my friend Stephen told you about. I need to be about the work that I'm good at doing and that brings me joy.

What's the catch for you? This isn't a top-down mandate. You all must initiate the conversations and participate in them. Some of you are having these conversations now in the Discernment Group or in Education for Ministry. Keep it up!

What's the catch for me? I can't make you do this. I have no magic power to force you into compliance. I won't threaten you with hell because Jesus already conquered that. Eternal flames are off the table!

I really, really hope you will participate though, because I believe this has the potential of making Redeemer the change agent for this entire neighborhood.

Here's what I need from you:

- Tell me in what context you'd like to have those conversations. Over a meal? At a coffee shop? Here at church?
- If some of you would like to read a book by Rachel Held Evans or Nadia Bolz-Weber and talk about it Sunday morning? Let's do that.
- Would you like to sponsor a house gathering to do a Bible Study, tell me when and where and what you wish to study.
- If you'd like to process through an experience you had doing service work, give me a call. We can meet and talk about it.
- If you'd like to spend your lunch hour with some friends talking about your faith journey, I can be there.
- Are there some of you who would be willing to do morning or evening prayer with me via Facebook Live? I'm willing to try it!

My time is better spent with you and Jesus than it is trying to craft the next Adult Forum Series that no one wants to attend.

So, let's get on the path toward a deeper relationship with Jesus. There will challenges, there will be doubts, and there will be moment of great joy.

Most of all, there will be Jesus' voice calling us home.