

A Righteous Branch

I want to just mention the Gospel reading today, before I really launch into talking about Jeremiah. Jesus has compassion on the people he sees because they seem like sheep without a shepherd. I think this is important because it calls to mind the reality that we do need guidance in order to be our best. It is never a really great situation when we just get to do whatever we want. We seem to know this instinctively and so we almost always look for that leadership and guidance in some form, and there is no shortage of competition for the position of shepherd or leader or king, and not all of the competitors really love us.

That is where Jeremiah comes in, and that is where we need to really pay attention, because it is one thing to be a sheep without a shepherd, it is another thing to follow a shepherd who is not a good shepherd, to be a follower of one of those thieves or robbers that Jesus talks about in another parable. That was what was getting Jeremiah all riled up, it wasn't just that the sheep were lost, it was that they were following the wrong people all together. Those who should have been in charge and leading the people in paths of righteousness were crushing them with burdens and pushing them down paths that did not lead to God. It's one thing to wander a bit, but be aware that there are wolves out there. This is what strikes me as a bit dangerous about our current spiritual direction: these people who increasingly identify as "nones," who are just out there on their own, are sheep without a shepherd. What is a bit fearsome is who might come along to volunteer to be their shepherd, it might not be someone who is holy and compassionate like Jesus. I'm not even going to bother naming names or pointing to individuals, because they all come and go, what I would rather do is to describe types of these false shepherds. To my mind there are three very common and recurring types of false shepherd, not to say there aren't more, or that there aren't many variations within these three types, but for the sake of clarity and time, I'm going to stick to three.

The first is the goddess of self help (I say goddess in this case because for some reason Oprah Winfrey pops into my head), this takes the perennial idolatry of Mammon and puts it in comfy pants and sneakers. It is the thing that tells you that you are not so lost as you think and that all you really need is to discover your true and best self and be true to that identity. The prosperity gospel frolics in a field of daisies telling you that if you just believe in (insert vanity here) that god (whoever that is) will bless you and you will find personal fulfillment. Now don't get me wrong, there is some serious appeal to this, despite my rather blithe dismissal of it. This cult is great for taking people off the scrap heap and helping them discover a sense of self-worth and hope. It can be quite therapeutic and helpful to an extent. The problem comes when someone in this mode runs into a real challenge, or gets in the grip of real sin. This false shepherd has no investment in warding off the wolves or correcting the sheep who wander off in dangerous places. On top of that, it's just way too easy for charlatans and hucksters to invade and pretend to be shepherds. This is, I think the thief and the robber that Jesus talks about in his Good Shepherd parable.

On the other end of the spectrum is the fundamentalist shepherd, who is all about keeping the sheep away from the wolves and out of dangerous places, but who has little real love for the sheep. This is the cult of the law that Jesus kept ramming his head against throughout his life, it isn't new, and it isn't going anywhere and it can infect any religion that exists. It preaches a fearful faith in which there are constant reasons to quarrel and fuss with one another. This is the shepherd who, more than any other, has driven the sheep away from the fold of God's love and grace and into atheism or agnosticism or

even into this peculiar “none” category. This shepherd is good at enforcing morality, but not good at showing love and mercy. If the self-help shepherd is a thief and a robber, the fundamentalists are a brood of vipers, according to both Jesus and John the Baptist.

Finally, the third false shepherd, is one that might just be the most pernicious of the lot. This one I will call the powerful shepherd. This one quite often seems like he should be the true shepherd, in fact, this shepherd can fit right into the description of Psalm 23. This shepherd promises us the blessings of the self-help shepherd and the security and certainty of the fundamentalist shepherd, and at the same time does seem to tell us that there is danger and does seem to protect us, offer us victory, assure us of our security and even promise us a land flowing with milk and honey. This one, friends and neighbors, is our most dangerous adversary from a spiritual perspective, precisely because he can seem so utterly perfect for what we want. This one has taken up residence in our country and many of our churches. This one will tell you that winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. This one will tell you that they are the only one who can solve your problems because they are strong and you are weak and need their protection, and you will want their protection. This one will seem like everything you ever wanted a god to be and there's only one little problem: this one is absolutely nothing like Jesus.

This one will tell you he is like Jesus though, he will tell you that the vision you see in Revelation of the mighty king seated on the throne is the Jesus that he represents. But he will not have the sympathy that Jesus has for the sheep without a shepherd, or the little ones, or the hungry, the poor or the widows and orphans, because they are all losers. He is not the righteous branch that stands for the remnant that came through the suffering. He is not how God works, no matter how much we would like that to be the case.

So what is does the “righteous Branch” look like? Well one thing is pretty certain if one reads the Gospel, the righteous Branch doesn't want dominion at the expense of the sheep, any of the sheep. He will not abide idolatry, even of himself. Jesus consistently finds himself aligned with the last and the least, he looks to those who are lost and can seem rather unimpressed with those who have risen to the top. He tells people who question his affinity for sinners and pariahs that he has come to save the lost, he is the physician for the sick, and that he welcomes the “little ones.” Following that model is hard work and it leads us to places where we must become vulnerable, and honestly most of us would much rather feel powerful than vulnerable, so that powerful shepherd beckons to us and even puts on a Jesus mask and tells us that Jesus' actual life isn't as important as the life in glory that we surely believe is the future reality.

To the extent that the church has adopted any of the false shepherds instead of the good shepherd it has ceased to be the body of Christ and the sheep are left again without a shepherd and the flocks are scattering. We only have one shepherd, and he tells us again and again that we need to learn to hear his voice. Why would we let ourselves buy a self-help Lord when Jesus says, “you must take up a cross and follow me?” Why do we let ourselves be scared back under the stone tablets of the law when Jesus accuses those who do such with the words of the Prophet Isaiah: “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.” Why would we want Jesus to be a powerful ruler instead of a gentle man who welcomes the little ones? We can and should examine ourselves along these lines, we have a faithful comparison and as many witnesses as we can get.