

## **“IN THE HEART OF THE D.S.”**

### **We must get to know them – The Lost Sheep**

Jesus said “I am the Good Shepherd: the Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep. But he that is a hireling, and not the shepherd whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catches them, and scattered the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep.<sup>1</sup>

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The parable of the Good Shepherd underscores a biblical and theological rationale for pursuing an understanding of Jesus’ role in leading and caring for his sheep. It models his expectation as to how his disciples must reach out for the least of these. Biblical scholars posit that the imagery presented by the metaphor of a shepherd is a common Old and New Testament biblical theme. It exemplifies certain “heart qualifications,” that is, of a Godly leader who demonstrates tender, sincere, intimate, loving attentiveness to their flock. They guide, correct, protect and feed their flock. The Good Shepherd is contrasted to a hireling who receives pay for his job but has no heart for the flock. His dedication to the flock is only up to the point that it benefits him. The hireling never takes time to care for them, to love them, far less to know them.

The Biblical narrative shows the Good Shepherd engages the sheep out of a labor of love and in spite of himself. He gives his life for the sheep and leads them wisely. Unlike the Hireling

<sup>1</sup> (John 10:2 – 13, [Kings James Version])

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who leaves when the process of care becomes taxing, troublesome and demands understanding and mercy, the Good Shepherd stays committed to the sheep.

The Bible speaks of the Good Shepherd through the lens of John's gospel as a leader that knows them. They know him by virtue of his commitment to them. The shepherd has the simplest but most intimate connection to the sheep. He has voice recognition among the sheep. He is authenticated and knows of them by his actions. He is the door; he gives them life and will give his life for them. This is the shepherd who envisions that all sheep, even those that "are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." They all shall be engrafted into his fold (Jn. 10:16).

The gospel of Matthew<sup>2</sup> corroborates John's acclaim of the importance of this imagery as we consider pastoral care to the beloved community. Jesus obviously sees the sheep metaphor as associated with the nation of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Through the lens of Matthew's gospel, Jesus' mission in life is primarily to this nation. He makes no effort to hide his commitment and passion to "Jewish nationalism;" he laments that his people are lost. He warns that we should "beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep clothing but inwardly they are ravening wolves." Sheep appear to be passive and gentle. They are not monolithic in appearance or mannerism. Individuals that are mal-intended see the assumption of the sheep's identity as the best disguise to infiltrate and destroy the beloved community.

In light of this information, Jesus asks this question in response to his critics: "What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man better than a sheep?"<sup>4</sup>

What man of you having an hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he finds it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbors, saying unto them, rejoice with me. For I have found my sheep which was lost (Lk 15: 4-6).

It is in the light of these narratives and Jesus' question that we could suggest that every sheep is important to Jesus. We, as leaders among the beloved community are mandated by Jesus to protect, guide and seek out his sheep as we nurture them. Responsibility to our task

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<sup>2</sup> (Matt. 7:15, [KJV])

<sup>3</sup> (Matt.10:6 [KJV])

<sup>4</sup> (Matt. 12:11-12a, [KJV])

transcends our own biases. Jesus expects that we engraft the sheep into the beloved community understanding that his directive is not a request but a command. It starts with our knowledge of Jesus the Master, and seeing the sheep through his eyes, in spite of their flaws. To that end, Jesus says to the apostle Peter:

Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, feed my Lambs. He saith unto him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, feed my sheep. He saith unto him again the third time, Simon, son of Jonah, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, feed my sheep.<sup>5</sup>

The frustration of Peter's response is fully commensurate with the intentionality of Jesus' question and his command. In theological circles the fact that Jesus questions Peter's love three times is important and merits exploration. It is generally accepted that the love Jesus spoke of is known as "*Agape love*;" this love is unemotional and unconditional. Jesus' question of Peter's love to the sheep was to correct Peter's response which indicated that his love, as professed of them to Jesus, was out of common interest, an emotional association as to a brother (*phileo*). Jesus, through what appeared to be the insistency of his questions, was provoking Peter to embrace a higher ideal of a love that was loving unconditionally. That's obviously what it will take to love those that are on the fringes; those that do not subscribe to the established ideals, norms or mores of society as we know it. It is a perfect picture of "the others" that we are endeavoring to understand.

Having established the type of love that is imparted unemotionally but logically and dispassionately, Jesus instructed Peter to feed the lamb. The Lambs are obviously defenseless and totally dependent on the shepherd. The negative colloquial expression that sheep are dumb is amplified, as if on steroids, when young ones (lambs) are factored into the equation. Feeding the lambs requires a degree of humility and a pastoral heart that looks beyond their fault. Their fractured nature, abnormal habits and incessant drive to violate all established boundaries requires patience as one provides them care. Jesus' mandate is to feed them! To be effective in this job, one must get to know them.

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<sup>5</sup> (John 21:15-17, [KJV])

Jesus' second iteration to Peter, to feed his sheep, reinforces his mandate with detailed precision. The word "feed" emerges from the Greek lexicon as the word *Poimaino*; it means to shepherd and implies "the whole office of the shepherd, guiding, guarding, folding of the flock as well as leading it to nourishment." <sup>6</sup>The flock is not limited to the sheep who are usually obedient but also include the lambs, the goats, the dogs and the hirelings. Evidently, Jesus' mandate to Peter is that his responsibility is to all living creatures within the flock, regardless of their peculiar foibles or behaviors. Peter had to be dispassionate and unbiased as he mastered the art of knowing his flock. It is in Peter's knowing the flock that a true expression of Jesus' love for his sheep is revealed; so too, it is in us getting to know "the others" that we would mirror Jesus' mandate and better understand how to reconnect them to the believing and beloved community.

***-From my Heart to your Heart -  
Getting to know your D.S. through these written narratives!  
More to be said in the next issue.***