

Gather Us In  
11/20/2022  
Jeremiah 23:1-6

Some years ago, a pastor was told by his diocese he was being reassigned to a different church. He read up on the church, looked at their financial reports, and saw on paper a church that was already doing very well. He saw no reason why he was being switched to serve them. Questioning the call but trusting in the movement of the Holy Spirit and the higher ups, he decided he would do a little bit of a test to see for himself what the needs of the church were. So, on the Sunday he was to be introduced to the congregation, he dressed not in his robes or shirt with collar, but ragged clothes, disguising himself instead as a homeless person. He entered the church and was neither greeted nor given a bulletin. So, he grabbed a bulletin off the top of the pile and entered the sanctuary. He went and sat in one of the front pews, and one of the ushers approached him, asking him to sit in the back where the sight of him wouldn't cause such a bother to the congregation. So, he got up and moved to one of the back pews. The service began, and when it came to the Passing of the Peace, no one wanted to shake his hand, nor was anyone willing to share the Peace with him. In fact, he was virtually ignored. Finally, it got to the part of the service where he was to be introduced. So, he was invited to come forward and say a few words. In horror, the congregation watched as this homeless man they had ignored got up and walked to the pulpit, listing off the sins committed against him by this church in the last half hour alone, closing with, "I now know why the diocese has decided to reassign me to this church, and I humbly accept their reassignment."

Now, why do I tell you this story? I tell it to you all because we have here a perfect example of the two kinds of shepherds mentioned in the reading today. On the one hand, we have the congregation, those who are Christians in name only. They get together to worship, they have fellowship together, they give out of felt obligation rather than love, and when presented with the opportunity to minister to someone in need, they push them aside instead. When given the opportunity to bring in someone from the margins and make them feel at home, they chose rather to serve their own desires, their own comfort, further scattering those who are in need. To these "false shepherds," God says in the reading, "I will scatter you as you have scattered my flock." Imagine if the pastor had preached on this passage to the congregation, the fear that would have crept through each of their hearts. Then again, maybe they are not to blame.

There is another lens through which to view the congregation: they are scattering the needy because they themselves have been led astray by a "false shepherd." They have been scattered from God's fold by a "false shepherd," being told they are doing everything right, they can relax, and therein losing sight of what it means to be a Christian, to be a "good shepherd." Thus, this may have been the reason this pastor was reassigned by the diocese: to shock them into realizing the harsh truth about themselves and to shepherd them back to the fold of God that they then might be able to shepherd the lost, the lonely, the broken, the scattered back to the fold, back to God's house. Hence, we have in the pastor a "good shepherd." However, it doesn't stop there. This sequence of pastor shepherding a scattered fold that is scattering others, it turns out, is the same sequence we see in the reading today.

God makes Their threat against the false shepherds, saying They will scatter the false shepherds as they scattered God's fold. Then, God says They will bring the scattered fold back from north and south, from east and west, back to the promised land. So, we have this promise that God will personally see to their being regathered, but the promise doesn't stop there. Then, we get this interesting section where God is talking about then raising out of the house of David a "righteous branch" that will "lead with justice and righteousness." Well, here we are on Christ the King Sunday, looking to the beginning of the Advent Season next week and decorating for Advent/Christmas this coming Saturday. Our eyes and minds are hyper-focused on Jesus, the self-proclaimed "Good Shepherd." We hear about this "righteous branch" who "rules with justice and righteousness" and we are quick to say that this righteous branch is Jesus the Christ alone. However, that's not entirely true.

A recent study found that, if left to do as nature intended, trees have the potential to grow endlessly. In fact, the scientists doing the study found that, the longer a tree is left to live, the faster it will grow. So too is this true with this righteous branch. It will start in the house of David, yes, but it will continue to grow, more and more limbs sprouting off of it with more limbs sprouting off of them as time goes on. It may start with Jesus, yes, but it does not end with him. Jesus, the Son, a member of the Triune God, comes to earth, gathering disciples and teaching them how they are to treat others, how they are to minister to the widow, the orphan, the alien, all those who have been scattered by the powers that be. Their ministry continues long after Jesus has died, risen, and ascended. They minister to the marginalized, gathering in those that others have sought to scatter, teaching others how to minister to them, and they then teach their followers, on and on down the generations. Well, it's been over 2,000 years since Jesus walked the earth, and you'd think there would be more good shepherds than "false shepherds" at this point, right? Unfortunately, no.

In the modern day, we have more false shepherds than ever, more powers and influences that have scattered God's fold to north, south, east, and west. While not in every church, false prophets and false shepherds pervade our faith. For example, those with greater financial resources are sought after and given greater voice than those with little or who cannot give as much. While churches aim to be inclusive and welcoming, the way one votes in an election or what teams you root for can alter how you are treated, whether for the better or the worse. The loudest voices, those that have nothing but hate for their neighbors, color our faith as one of exclusion, driving away those who are looking for a place simply to be. The most famous televangelists use our faith not to further God's word but to line their pockets and amass wealth. Such efforts of these false shepherds have made those of us looking to do God's work, those of us looking to gather in, all the harder. However, much like the pastor in my initial story, as members of this "righteous branch," we must not shy away and give up. We have been called to gather in from north and south, from east and west, the widow, the orphan, the homeless, the hungry, the alien, all those the church has scattered. Ours is not an easy feat, but it is a righteous and just calling, one enacted by God and passed on to us as Jesus' followers to carry forth until he comes again. As the Spirit has gathered us in, sinners though we may be, so too must we gather in others. So, I ask: How are you gathering in the lost, the lonely, the broken, and the scattered?