

Good Shepherd Sermon

At this time of the Coronavirus Pandemic when we are physically separated from one another, either living with immediate family members or alone, I would like to share a story with you. The story is about our belief in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and our connections with other human beings on God's earth. It is also a reminder of how different our lives could be.

I have been thinking of persons who live in New York, Chicago, and other big cities who have been affected by the Coronavirus. The virus seems to be especially hard to control in these large communities, in part, because people are in such close proximity to one another. At this time when public transportation is limited and precautions are in place, I was reminded of the years that I was traveling to and from Chicago on a weekly basis.

During a portion of my seminary years, I traveled to Chicago for classes. When I decided to study at McCormick Theological Seminary, I wondered how I would feel being in the big city every week; maneuvering through the hustle and bustle of Chicago. I grew up in Waukesha, a community that now has about 70,000 people. I worked at Marquette University in Milwaukee, and in time, I adjusted to being in an urban environment. But, I wasn't sure how I would feel about being in Chicago every week; it was quite different from other places I had lived (and it is very different from living in Wilton or even La Crosse).

Most of the time when I rode the "L" (i.e. elevated transit system car) or bus in Chicago, and I looked at people's faces, I didn't see joy. Instead, I would see neutral expressions at best, but mostly grief and sadness. I often prayed for the people on the "L" and bus, and I asked God to watch over them. I did not know the reasons for their sadness or pain. Did they have enough food, adequately heated apartments or homes, warm clothes when the weather was cold, jobs, families, someone, anyone, who loved them? All these questions would flood my thoughts, and I would wonder how God felt when he looked upon their grief and sadness. No doubt some of them believed in God, but not all. How different our lives could be, Lord.

On the way back home from seminary one week, I got on the "L" car, and there was a person stretched out over 3 or 4 seats, sleeping. The person's coat was torn and tattered, his or her knitted socks were frayed and ripped, and he or she had an old bag with a few items in it. I saw the person's elbow poking through a badly ripped sweater. There was a large hole in the knitting, and the sweater was definitely worn out. I couldn't tell if this person was old, young, male, female, black, white or another color, because his or her face was covered by the hood of the winter coat, and his or her elbow was bent, so that the end of it appeared white. Then, I saw a photo name badge. The photo was of an African-American

woman, light-skinned, who was probably in her early 50's. Her badge said that she was a student at the City College of Chicago.

I thought to myself, "a fellow student." She could have been me, or any one of us. But, we were born to the parents we had, most of us in rural, small or medium-size cities; and most of us with parents who believed in God and encouraged us to attend church. I didn't know if the women on the "L" knew God or not. Yet, if our circumstances had been different, I, or any one of us, could have been that person sleeping in the "L" car. How different our lives could be, Lord.

The people who got on the "L" at each stop looked at her as they tried to find a seat, but they all let her sleep. There were at least 30 people on the car. Even though some were standing up holding onto bars and straps, they knew that she must really need sleep. Everyone left her alone, and I prayed for her. How different our lives could be, Lord, had we been born to different parents, in a different place, of a different color, of a different time, of a different culture, perhaps without knowing about Jesus' death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. Perhaps not knowing that Jesus provides those who believe in him safety and security in the sheepfold, and the possibility of everlasting life with him. How different our lives could be, Lord.

Perhaps while visiting Chicago, you have thought about how it would be to live there and to ride the "L" or bus on a daily basis. I can say that for the most part, the people I saw while traveling in Chicago were very understanding. Many of them seemed to know stress, and grief, and pain, so that when they saw those expressions on the faces of others, they understood. They allowed a woman who appeared to be homeless, or perhaps "couch hopping" to sleep on the "L", and they stood up rather than to wake her. How different our lives could be, Lord.

At times, we get caught up in our own lives and we fail to think of others in God's world. We may also fail to appreciate God's gift of life on earth and God's gift of eternal life for those who believe in Jesus. As I would sit on the "L," or bus, and pray, I would be reminded that all of these people are part of God's creation. God created each one of them! Any one of us could have been that homeless person. Any one of us could have been one of the grieving persons on the "L". Any one of us, could have been a person playing a guitar on the subway platform for spare change. Any one of us could have been working for minimum wage, living paycheck-to-paycheck, or today have lost a job due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. How different our lives could be, Lord.

Jesus reminds us in our gospel passage today, that he is the "gate" and the "Good Shepherd." He wants all humankind to be his sheep. While some would say that this gospel message is a message of

exclusion; of Jesus trying to keep people out of the sheepfold, in reality, it is about Jesus wanting all to know him and to be his sheep. Jesus models for us how we are to be, and any judgment about who should enter is up to God, not us. God is the judge, we are not to judge. Jesus provides safety and security for us. Jesus is present with us, no matter our race, cultural heritage, abilities, economic status, ...no matter what we may bring to the sheepfold. Jesus descended to earth in the hope of taking us with him, through the sheep gate, to receive the free gift of salvation. In John 3:16, Jesus is the gateway for he says that it is "through him" that we have eternal life. In John 14, Jesus tells us, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through me." We learn through scripture, that Jesus is the gate, the pathway, the way that leads us to eternal life. He opens the gate for us as Christian believers. He provides us with safety and security in the sheepfold, as we go out to pasture and as we return through the gate. We are his sheep, and he is the Good Shepherd who leads us to everlasting life.

In 1 John 3, verses 16-18, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Some of the people I saw on the "L" and bus in Chicago knew God. Some of the people we meet every day know God, and some do not. How different our lives could be, Lord, if we did not know you. How important it is for those of us who call you "Lord," to share your good news with others. How important it is Lord, for us to share your love.

Our scripture passage reminds me of the saying, "talk the talk and walk the walk." It is not enough to love in word, in talk, but we are to love in deed and in truth. We are to walk the walk, and let our actions speak louder than our words. We are to show our love for others, especially for those in our society who are less fortunate than ourselves. How different our lives could be, Lord. For the stranger that we see, could have been us. Through prayer and sharing God's good news with others, through giving to missions and the food pantry, through modeling God's love and forgiveness, through stepping out in deed and truth to help others in need, we move beyond "talking the talk," to "walking the walk."

Jesus said, "Love one another as I have loved you." Let us be present with others, teaching them of Jesus' love, as we seek to bring more sheep to the sheepfold. In deed and in truth, let us share the message of God's unfailing love to a world that so desperately needs to know Jesus, the "gate" and the "Good Shepherd." Amen.