

Introduction

Some preachers have described their work as comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. It's a clever saying, and I think I understand what they mean. But I've always felt that there is something a little troubling about it.

It seems to me that all of us sometimes need to be comforted and all of us sometimes need to be—maybe not afflicted, but at least—challenged.

In our Scripture for this morning the emphasis is very much on comfort. Jesus says that he is the good shepherd and that we are his flock.

I'm pretty sure that what lies behind Jesus' words is the 23rd psalm. The psalmist found great comfort in thinking of the Lord as his shepherd.

But do we today need comfort? I think we do.

Because when take seriously what we are being told about the world today, apart from the resources of our faith, the world is bleak and our lives are bleak.

One of America's most distinguished theoretical physicists is Steven Weinberg of the University of Texas. He is a Nobel Laureate and an outspoken atheist. Some years ago he wrote a sentence which has become famous: "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless." He went on to say that "faced with this unloving, impersonal universe we [can] make a little island of warmth and love and science and art for ourselves." I appreciate that humanistic supplement, but his view of the entire universe, that it is all pointless, is bleak. I think that, if we dispense with the resources that our faith gives us, Weinberg is right about the universe.

It's the same when we turn from the universe in general to society in particular. Western society, it seems to me, is continuing to live off the principal of its Christian heritage as it slowly edges away from confidence in the Christian gospel. As the principal disappears, it becomes more and more evident how bleak life is apart from our faith.

In our Scripture Jesus dispels the bleakness of the universe and of life. In words of profound comfort, he assures us: I am your Shepherd. You are my sheep. It's not all pointless.

You and I belong to our wonderful God. The Lord is going to take care of us. The Lord will make us to lie down in green pastures and lead us beside still waters. Our cup will run over. Goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. We will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This morning I want to talk about some other things that Jesus says in this wonderful passage. I think all of them are important to us in the church today.

Jesus Has Other Sheep that We Do Not Know About

In verse 16, Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold."

I confess that I don't know whom Jesus meant in his own time. Maybe he was thinking about people whom he had met and who had accepted his message of the kingdom, but who were unknown to the disciples. Maybe they were Samaritans or Gentiles. Maybe they were women. Maybe they were people associated with the ministry of John the Baptist. We just don't know who they were.

But what we do know is that Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that they were not the only people with whom he was working.

I think you and I need to understand that, too. We need to be aware that Jesus is doing many things in the world that we do not know anything about.

It's important to know this because it's the truth. It's also important to know it because it's good for our spiritual health. It is spiritually unhealthy for us to assume that we are God's only people. If we imagine we exclusively are Jesus' people, we can become proud. We can look down on everyone else.

Instead of thinking of ourselves as God's exclusive people, we should be offering prayers like one which is found in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*. It says: "Open, O Lord, the eyes of all people to behold thy gracious hand in all thy works."

Let me put this point simply. Jesus is our shepherd. We are Jesus' sheep. Jesus has other sheep. We don't know who they are. And that's all right.

Some Day All of Jesus' Sheep Will Be One Flock

The second point is also in verse 16. Jesus says, "There will be one flock, one shepherd."

The Lord Jesus has many wonderful people today. About one out of every three people on earth is a member of the church, the flock of Jesus. But Jesus' flock is divided into many denominations. This is not what God intended. God intended us to be one. Jesus prayed for us: "Father, may they all be one."

So this promise of Jesus that someday we will all be one encourages us. We will not always be divided. The Lord is going to bring us together. We thank God for this. And we do what we can to work toward this.

Working for Christian unity isn't always easy. One of my professors, Henry Chadwick, told a story about a lovely village in the highlands of Scotland. One day a tourist said to a villager, "Your village is charming." The villager thanked him, and the tourist asked, "How many churches do you have in the village?" The villager said, "Well, we used to have two. But then many of us became interested in Christian unity and ecumenism, and now we have three." The struggle for Christian unity can be difficult.

Unity doesn't mean uniformity. Jesus does not want us all to be alike. God makes us different and gives us different gifts.

One Christian with very special gifts was St. Patrick, whose feast day is today [March 17, 2013]. Patrick was born into a pagan family in Wales in about 390 A.D., and he died in Ireland in about 460 A.D. When he was 15 years old he was kidnaped by Irish raiders and taken as a slave to Ireland, where he tended sheep. While he was there he was converted and became a serious Christian. He wrote of this experience: "It was there that the Lord opened the understanding of my unbelieving heart, so that I should recall my sins and turn with all my heart to the Lord my God."

Patrick escaped from slavery in Ireland and made his way back to Britain, where he studied to become a Christian minister. He had a dream of Irish people calling out to him: "Holy boy, we are asking you to come and walk among us again." Supported by Christians in Britain, he returned as a missionary to the people who once had enslaved him. Patrick was able to do what those Christians who went before him had been unable to do. He converted thousands of the pagan people there to the Christian faith. He was one of the most successful missionaries in Christian history.

And he did more than evangelize. He established churches, he sponsored educational programs, and he intervened in public matters. We have a letter that he wrote to the soldiers of a Christian general named Coroticus in which he condemns them for killing and enslaving some of their fellow Christians, persons whom Patrick had baptized and confirmed in the faith.

Patrick's life is obscured by legends. It apparently is not true that he used a shamrock to teach the doctrine of the Trinity, but he did teach that doctrine, for he wrote: "I must teach from the rule of faith of the Trinity." He apparently did not drive the snakes out of Ireland, but he did bring light and hope and love to a people who lived in darkness and in the shadow of death, a people who did not know that God is light and love. Patrick was plainspoken, humble, courageous, and determined. He wrote of himself: "I am Patrick, a sinner, most uncultivated and least of all the faithful." His work displays what God can do through a devoted missionary. Missionary work matters very much, and missionaries deserve our support today.

We will not all be like St. Patrick. We will not all be alike. But we can all be unified as Christians. We need to catch a glimpse of the unity to which God is calling us. Some Christians seem to see this more clearly than the rest of us.

One of them was Peter Meiderlin, a Lutheran, who wrote what has been called the Magna Carta of Christian unity: *In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.*

In the 17th century a Puritan, Richard Baxter, wrote repeatedly in support of the unity of Christians. *The union of Christians*, he wrote, *tendeth to convert the world, as it is notorious that their divisions have hindered their conversion.*

Uniting love is the glory and perfection of the church.

God will [not] own . . . any person who is so independent, as not to come to him as in communion with all the Christians in the world.

Jesus Will Die to Save His Sheep

The third point that Jesus makes is found in verse 17: "I lay down my life."

Jesus says this because it's just common sense that a good shepherd would be committed to protecting his sheep, no matter what it takes. Of course, a hired hand could not be counted on to risk his life in order to protect sheep from predators.

But Jesus is not that kind of shepherd. He is a good shepherd. He is prepared to give his life to protect us.

And that, of course, is just what he did. He died for us.

For many years I have been puzzled about why this teaching of Jesus does not play a larger role than it does in the doctrine of the atonement. When we list the many New Testament understandings of the meaning of Jesus' death, why do we ignore this one? I don't know the answer. But I feel this is just as important an understanding of Jesus' death as any of the ones that are usually mentioned.

In the church today we have many reminders that Jesus died for us. We are reminded when we baptize. We are reminded when we have Holy Communion. We are reminded when we see crosses in the church or on a chain around someone's neck. We are reminded this time of the year as we celebrate Holy Week, which begins next Sunday. We are reminded on Good Friday that the good shepherd has given his life for us all.

Jesus' Sheep Know His Voice and Follow Him

The next idea appears in verse 27: "My sheep hear my voice . . . and they follow me."

I think I can understand what this would have meant when Jesus said it.

I assume that shepherds would have gotten lonely in their work. From time to time, they must have visited with each other. When they did that, their two flocks presumably got all mixed up. When it was time for the shepherds to go their different ways, each one would call out to his own sheep. The sheep would hear their own shepherd's voice and follow him, thus separating back into the flocks to which they belonged.

Jesus says that we who are his flock hear his voice. Speaking for myself, I have never heard Jesus' voice in an audible way or as a mystical experience. But I think I hear Jesus speaking to us today. I think I know what he is saying to us.

He is saying, Be a giver, not just a taker.

He is saying, Love people, don't hate them.

He is saying, Life is a gift not an entitlement. Be grateful for your life, and live it responsibly.

He is saying, Be a peacemaker, not a trouble-maker.

He is saying, Don't be selfish. Be compassionate. Do what you can to help those who are poor, and powerless, and suffering, and lonely, and damaged.

I hear Jesus saying this to us today: "For not with swords loud clashing, or roll of stirring drums, with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes."

Jesus Gives His Sheep Eternal Life

The next point appears in verse 28: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish."

With this point Jesus' takes his message of reassurance beyond time and into eternity.

The metaphor of sheep does not seem to suggest eternal life. Maybe what suggested it was the phrase at the end of the 23rd psalm: "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Christianity is both practical and supernatural. It teaches us a way of living in this present life. It also provides us with hope for the future life.

In fact, the truth is that Christianity is practical because it is supernatural. Eternity is important for human beings. With these words Jesus gives us hope for eternal life.

He has confirmed that hope by his own resurrection from the dead. That is the reason for the hope that is in us.

And he has ratified that resurrection hope because his Spirit has poured God's love in our hearts, and he has persuaded us that "neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It is out of that great love for us that the good shepherd promised us that the life he gives us is eternal. This comforts us when we lose those we love. And it encourages us to carry on faithfully when things are really difficult.

No One Can Take Jesus' Sheep Away from Him

The final point appears in verse 28: "No one will snatch them out of my hand."

This point takes Jesus' reassurance a step further by speaking of its permanence.

It is reassuring to know that Jesus is a good shepherd.

It is more reassuring to know that we are his sheep.

It is even more reassuring to know that we always be his sheep.

We need this reassurance because when we are honest with ourselves, we know that we can't count on ourselves always to be faithful to Christ.

But we believe that Christ will always be faithful to us. He will not allow anything to take us away from him.

This confidence frees us from anxiety about our final destiny. It frees us to trust in him. It frees us to live cheerfully, openly, with love and gratitude.

My friends, Jesus will never, ever let you go. He will always be your shepherd. You will always be enfolded in his love. He will always take care of you.

Conclusion

If you are like me, you haven't had any direct experience of sheep and shepherds. Even so, I think we can appreciate Jesus' words. We do not understand them all. But they encourage us, and they give us hope. With his help, we will follow him all the days of our lives. And we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.