

SHEPHERDS VS. CELEBRITIES

7/18/21 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 11 (B): ~~Jeremiah 23:1-6~~; Psalm 23 ; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Come, Holy Spirit. Take our lips and speak through them; take our minds and think with them; take our hearts and set them on fire, in the name of the Holy Trinity. Amen.

“Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil; for God is with us.”

Can you picture the people gathered 'round; grasping through the crowd; begging that “they might touch even the fringe of Jesus’s cloak”? It’s a powerful image, isn’t it? Even a bit overwhelming. And it takes some mental gymnastics to make sense of people believing that strongly that simply touching his cloak’s fringe would transform their lives!

At the same time, the scene’s looks a lot like a crowd of groupies clamoring to get close to a celebrity or sports star. It’s understandable that we admire someone who’s excelling in their role, in ways we’re sure we could never achieve. But isn’t it strange the way we essentially assign super-human powers to people who really have no ability to grant us healing or a better life?

“The LORD lies us down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters.”

I was aware of assigning superhuman powers to a baseball player when I attended a Padres game a few weeks ago. Now, I understand that the Diamondbacks aren’t that great of team, but the Padres hit five home runs that night! It was thrilling! I could become a baseball fan—if the crowd always got to stand up and cheer that often—and have homerun fireworks all evening long!

And how about that Fernando Tatis, Jr.? He alone hit three of those home runs! Because I’m not a big sports fan, I hadn’t even heard of him before that night. But sitting there, watching him swing that bat, with what looked like so little effort; tracking him as he basically skipped from from one base to the next; seeing him up on the big screen, crossing himself as he rounded home plate; and smiling with him as he did his ritualistic victory dance, I wanted to know everything about him!

“The LORD...has anointed our heads with oil; our cup is running over.”

I contemplated following Tatis on Twitter, and finding out where I might see him in-person. I wanted to touch his dreadlocks!* But why? How would my life be any different by being up-close and personal with a baseball player? I think one of the things, that this human tendency to idolize others, speaks to is our need—our deep desire—for meaningful connections.

The desire for deep connections is what Jesus sees on the faces of all those who have gathered. Our Gospel reading tell us he looks out at them, and can’t resist helping; he “has compassion for them.” They don’t know for sure what type of healing Jesus will grant them; they don’t fully understand from where his power originates, but they absolutely trust...their lives will be changed...if they but touch the fringe of his cloak.

“The LORD revives our souls and guides us along right pathways.”

In our reading from Ephesians, the apostle Paul is quoted, instructing the people of the early church to have compassion for each other. He points out that they, too, have a need to belong, to be a part of one group or another. Then Paul goes on to point out that, no matter which earthly group they identify with—the circumcised or the uncircumcised—they are all siblings in Christ, unified in the Spirit.

Likewise, Jesus makes note that the people gathered on the shore that day were like sheep without a shepherd. That’s why we need leaders like Paul to remind us in whom we should place super-human powers—that we can’t assign the ability to transform lives to celebrities or sport stars; that kind of power belongs only to God!

“The LORD is our shepherd; we shall not be in want.”

Paul’s encouragement to the people of Ephesus is reminiscent of an interview I heard a while back with the leader of a grassroots social justice association. I can't recall the name of the organization, but I may have mentioned them in the past. Rather than dictating what types of action each sub-group takes, this association insists that each faction operate independently; doing what they know to be right for the cause in their own way...in their own context.

All the while, the various groups acknowledge that they might not agree with the tactics of another’s. However, they have agreed to trust that the various efforts will move forward the over-arching goal to bring about racial and social justice in the world. Of course, that kind of structure makes things messy! Being Christian is messy.

“God’s rod and staff comfort us...we will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.”

Messiness and complications are exactly what the apostles encountered in the scene described in Mark’s Gospel. They had planned for a relaxing and rejuvenating getaway with Jesus, but—just like the paparazzi surrounding a celebrity—the disciples watch in horror as Jesus is overtaken by those who have heard about his ability to heal. But, as Jesus so often does, he makes time for those who are most in need.

Jesus is the ultimate shepherd, providing care for the flock. But we also shepherd each other as disciples of Christ. We might not all agree which metaphorical patch of grass would be the most beneficial to the most people, but we remind each other to whom we belong, who is the only one who can truly heal us, and who can transform our lives.

“Surely God’s goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life.”

—AMEN

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the

worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Psalm 23

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; *
I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures *
and leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He revives my soul *
and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil; *
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; *
you have anointed my head with oil,
and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, *
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" -- a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands-- remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth

of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

**Please note that though I refer to wanting to touch someone's hair in this sermon, this isn't something I'd actually do, as I would never intentionally practice such disrespect. —
Mother Brenda*