

Good Shepherd

Debby and I took advantage of our time in Hawaii to visit New Zealand. Our trip through both of the main islands of New Zealand was largely on our own. The tour company arranged transportation and hotels with prepaid meals. We were on our own for one meal a day. Each morning a different bus would pick us up. Everywhere we went the people of New Zealand acted as if the country was one huge tourist mecca. They would ask us very politely which direction we were going. Answer, North or South.

Our time in Queenstown featured a visit to a sheep farm. At that time there were almost 4 million people in New Zealand. During lambing season there were over 18 million sheep. Everyone in New Zealand is a shepherd either of tourists or sheep and sometimes both even though 90% of Kiwis live in urban areas.

In Queenstown we met Val, shepherd par excellence. She was a border collie. Her zeal for the sheep was all consuming. She had to be tied up lest she herd tourists for lack of nearby sheep. Her handler said she would herd spiders if they were the only thing in sight. Responding to a couple of whistles Val took off out of sight up a very steep hill. Four minutes later a mob of sheep came storming down the hill with Val at their heels. This was major league Kiwi showmanship at an all-pro level.

Val was living out her breeding. She was hard-wired for sheep. In the words of the old hymn “a shepherdess on the green.” She was no hireling but a true amateur. Shepherding ruled her DNA.

Fr. Richard was supposed to teach something called systematic theology. He was my teacher, I think. I rarely saw him because he was hiding out in his apartment drunk or shaking through a hangover. He was enabled in this by an absentee administration, a faculty which was 50% alcoholic and numerous student friends, paramours and hangers on who pretended to take care of him while drinking his whiskey.

He did come to class from time to time. There he did a Glen Beck impression drawing a random series circles and arrows on the blackboard emphasized by extensive underlining. His lectures reflected the scribbles. He would point to his Hieronymus Bosch horror scene and say with great conviction with all of his waning force, “Gentlemen, don’t become hucksters.”

We knew what he meant. Don’t sell out. Don’t allow the power of the Gospel to be watered down into convenient, cute, effete religious trinkets. Tell the truth. Don’t bring contempt on the theological enterprise with contrived gimmicks extrapolated from the zeitgeist. Don’t be wimps. In a word: Be good shepherds.

I offer these stories to help us bridge the distance from the agricultural metaphors referencing shepherds in the bible.

Jesus tells us in the scripture today from John 10 that he is a **good** shepherd. Good shepherd is an oxymoron in the first century. There is no such thing. You can be “good” or a “shepherd” but not both. Shepherds were always bad; good for kicking around, abusing, mistrusting and firing.

There is plenty of irony in this statement. Jesus claims a trade no one else wants to be or do. Imagine this scene. “Mom, I got engaged. What does she do. She is a shepherdess!”

Shepherds are always hirelings. Shepherds were not part of the owner class who have people for that. A chief shepherd was a no count in charge of a bunch of unemployable layabouts. Worse, the chief shepherd was caught between his useless employees and an irascible entitled management.

Jesus knows his sheep and calls them by name. He really knows them. He knows they are lost, silly, easily distracted and valuable to the owner. He also, as we do, knows they are not sheep. They are people, not just sources for lamb chops and sweaters.

Most people who do ministry because they are called to it. Like Val, they have a passion for ministry. Most people minister as baptized ministers. Chief shepherds help the baptized match their gifts to the tasks at hand. They are called senior wardens and clergy.

Shepherds of all ranks run the same risk as Val the sheepdog. They live in peril of having nothing left for self at the end of the day; they may end up spent, empty and useless to themselves and others.

Our God is one of life and light, not of darkness and death. Jesus who is our life, lights our way as we become Good Shepherds ourselves. If we are spending our spiritual and physical capital in a frenetic race to be good shepherds and end up effete, tired, worn out, cynical, or angry, we have lost the race.

Our first task is to shepherd ourselves. You all know the airline warning about putting on your own oxygen mask first. Our oxygen consists of defining ourselves for ourselves. If we abdicate our responsibility to be ourselves someone else will be happy to cram us into their definition of what a good shepherd is. Good shepherds get sabotaged and character assassinated. Occasionally their critics are right.

Each of us has the power of Jesus’ resurrection to be a good shepherd. We are good when we maintain our identity against the principalities and powers of culture, of local coercion, of insularity, bigotry and other people’s perceived self-interest. We are called selfish and full of ourselves. When this happens we will know that we are good shepherds indeed. We have found our home and have taken ourselves there. The one who brings us home, is Jesus.