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July 22, 2018

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT  
9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Last weekend Eric and I went to Stanford for the CMR Stampede Quick Draw & Art Auction. Of course my first thought when I heard “quick draw” is that it was a shooting competition. It’s really artists drawing, painting, and sculpting while we watched, followed by an auction of those pieces of art.

Anyway, one of the paintings that caught my attention was a winter scene. I watched the artist painting a herd of cattle surrounded by a fence with snow-dusted mountains in the background. It was a nice picture but not as dynamic or showy as some of the others.

But when that painting came up for auction I saw the last part of the picture that wasn’t there while I was watching the artist. A dog sat at the space between the two parts of the fencing. The title of the painting was something like “The Small Gatekeeper”. That little dog in the center of the painting changed the whole scene. It was no longer just a group of cows in a field. There sat an attentive dog, ready to jump into action if even one of those cows would try to get by him.

I thought about that painting as I reflected on our readings for today. We often think of shepherds like that cattle dog. He was keeping those cows safe within the corral and surely would have fought off any intruders that came by. Psalm 23 has those same images—the shepherd’s rod and staff are signs of protection. The shepherd walks through the darkest valleys with us and feeds us, even in the presence of our enemies.

An attentive, protective shepherd is so unlike the shepherds for God’s people Jeremiah condemns in our first reading today. The Lord vows to raise up new shepherds who will gather the people and restore their community. This is the job of a faithful shepherd in the kingdom of God, to gather the people and build community.

In our gospel reading, Jesus has been training his disciples to be those future faithful shepherds. They have been out in the community, preaching, teaching, and healing and they have come back to tell Jesus how it all went.

In the life of the church, we call pastors who serve as shepherds to gather the people together for worship and for service in the world. We have other shepherds, too. Lay leaders who teach us and feed us and pray for us in our times of need.

Over the past year our staff and church council leaders have been reading material produced by a group called Milestones Ministry. We have been learning about ways we can better address the faith formation of our congregation so that faith is not just something we do on Sunday mornings but a way that we live in relationship with God and with one another every day.

The newest book by David Anderson of Milestones Ministry is called *Shepherd of Souls* in which he calls churches to be “relational, not just organizationally effective.”<sup>i</sup> Anderson encourages congregations to see all members, not just pastors and paid staff, as shepherds of the souls in our care—both in the church and in our daily lives.

Following the lead of Jesus, we see that the kind of shepherd Jesus trains us to be is a shepherd who has compassion for people in need. Compassion literally means “with-suffering.” Jesus saw the needs of the people who followed him and the disciples to their deserted place and, as much as Jesus and the disciples were in need of rest and food for themselves, Jesus had compassion for the people. He saw their suffering and entered into it with them.

The passage that comes between verses 35 and 52 that was skipped in our reading today includes the Feeding of the 5,000. We’ll hear that story next week from John’s gospel, but here in Mark we see that the feeding with food, follows the feeding of their longings for a shepherd. Jesus feeds them by teaching them many things, then feeding their tummies with bread and fish, and then, at the end of the reading Jesus feeds the needs of another crowd by healing them.

We show compassion for our families and neighbors every day as parents and spouses and friends. We suffer-with those we love who are sick or afraid or grieving or wondering what might be next. It’s good to remember that we do not shepherd alone, because Jesus our shepherd is in the midst of the pain and suffering in the world.

Here at Zion, we are exploring how we can lift up shepherding relationships in a variety of ways. For example, our ministry with our youngest families is called Frolic and we will be introducing the role of Frolic Friends in which each young family is partnered with an individual, a couple, or a family with older kids from our congregation. We hope that these relationships will provide support and wisdom from those who have lived through the infant and toddler stage of life.

Falan will be looking for Sunday School teachers and helpers again this year. We’ll need people to help out with Family Fun nights and Parents’ Night Out events. Last spring our Rainbow Choir had a fun tea party with some of our adults. Those once in a while activities are great ways to connect with the elementary aged children.

Our confirmation youth will be asked to find a Confirmation Companion for the coming year—or two! We used to call them mentors, but I’m changing that to Confirmation Companions because we really just want people to walk alongside these young people, to ask questions with them, to wonder and explore together this gift of faith that continues to grow in each of us throughout our lives.

In the August newsletter I have written about these as well as another group who is need of our shepherding care. We have a number of young adults who are exploring this Christian life for the first time. Their childhoods had little church experience or faith instruction and they want to know more. We are in need of some shepherds to enter into their wonderings about God and what it means to live as God’s people.

One of our big questions going forward is how we will continue to shepherd our high school youth now that Kris will be leaving our staff. I will be meeting with those families and others to think about what our next steps will be.

One of the laments I hear quite often is, “Where are the teenagers?” We want them here but we also know that there are many demands on their time.

Maybe it’s time to think about a new shepherding model other than a staff person who is responsible for all of the teens. Maybe we could think about how to shepherd them where they are—and to help them grow as shepherds for their friends and classmates. I don’t know what youth ministry will be like in the coming year, but I hope that we will consider both the needs and the gifts of that age group and have compassion *for* them and *with* them.

And let’s not forget what great shepherds our children are! It seems compassion comes a little more naturally for kids. How many of us have received a hug, a drawing, a bunch of wildflowers, or some words of wisdom from a child? None of us are too young or too old to be a shepherd of souls. We all have life experiences that help us have compassion for others.

All of these shepherding roles will serve to gather God’s people and build a community of care.

Like the dog that seems small compared to the herd of cattle in his care, we sometimes feel too small to be a shepherd in the kingdom of God—too small in faith, too small in knowledge, too small in the amount of time we have available. But we are not too small when we remember that we are just one of many shepherds.

And Jesus, whose compassion surrounds and fills *our* hearts and lives, gives us the compassion we need to serve alongside him to build faith, inspire hope, and express the love of God to the people we meet.

With the words of the *Taking Faith Home* Prayer for the Week, let us pray:  
Lord Jesus, you who care for us as a shepherd, guide us to care for others with your tender and healing touch. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> *Shepherd of Souls* by David W. Anderson, © 2018 Milestones Ministry, LLC, p. 19