

“Shepherd Connection”

Jeremiah 23:4-5, Psalm 23, Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34 and 53-56

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Prayer for Understanding Eternal Spirit, you flow through the ages from the pages of Scripture, healing with your comfort, transforming with your challenge and inspiring to love extravagantly. Open us to perceive you. We pray in the name of the Living Word. Amen.

There are several scriptures that speak of God being our shepherd and we being God’s sheep. Shepherds feed the sheep either directly or by leading the sheep to nutritious meadows. We are hungry. God feeds us physically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. God feeds us love, joy, grace, peace, hope, energy, and life. We are to share and take turns being shepherds for each other. The prophet Jeremiah proclaims. **Jeremiah 23:4-5 NLT** “Then I will appoint responsible shepherds who will care for them, and they will never be afraid again. Not a single one will be lost or missing. I, the Lord, have spoken! “For the time is coming,” says the Lord, “when I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David’s line. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land.”

The disciples having been nourished by Jesus, the good shepherd, went out to shepherd others. The gospel of Mark states: **Mark 6:30-32 NLT** “The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and taught. Then Jesus said, “Let us go off by ourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile.” Jesus said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles did not even have time to eat. So they left by boat for a deserted place, where they could be alone.”

Jesus leads his sheep on a spiritual retreat where the disciples can be fed and learn a deeper teaching about compassion for all people. They travel to a deserted place where physical food is not typically found. Jesus is shepherding on how to connect with God the source of compassion and all nourishment. The desert is a state of being, a receptiveness to God, a connection to God. Jesus began his ministry in the desert for 40 days to learn how to be fed by God, be nurtured by God, and connected with God. Jesus’ connection with Creator God, the divine shepherd, nourishes Jesus with all Jesus needs to shepherd people.

Without intentional connection to God, we quickly become famished. How do you daily, weekly, and regularly connect with God? How are you learning to be sustained by the goodness of God and God’s good creation? How do you partner with God in sustaining life? How do you co-create with God’s redemption, making all glorious? How do you receive blessings and share blessings? How do you savor God’s compassion and be compassionate?

As life evolves, our green pastures change. When pasturing sheep, there is a time for the sheep to devour the pasture, a time when the sheep are moved off the pasture so the pasture can grow, a time for the sheep to return for another feeding. A variety of ways to connect with God is beneficial. I connect with God through nature, walking, biking, trees, and mountains. Without a series of connection exercises, spiritual disciples, I quickly become famished. Recently, I have rediscovered swimming. Once a week, I swim for an hour. Even though I enjoy swimming, the first few times swimming I became bored, tired, and tediously watched the clock. I experiment with different ways to connect with God while swimming. Currently, I begin with thanksgiving, gratitude, and counting my blessings. Sometimes, I get fully absorbed into feasting upon God’s blessings and swim into the wall. Next, I ponder what is God inviting me to do? Who is God inviting me to be? I ponder how I can bless others. I pray for others. The hour speeds by; sometimes I even swim more than an hour. Physically swimming is great for my health and joints. Swimming has become another way I connect with God. What do you do to connect with God?

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 NLT “The apostles returned to Jesus from their ministry tour and told him all they had done and taught. Then Jesus said, “Let us go off by ourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile.” Jesus said this because there were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his apostles did not even have time to eat. So they left by boat for a deserted place, where they could be alone. But many people recognized them and saw them leaving, and people from many towns ran ahead along the

shore and got there ahead of them. Jesus saw the huge crowd as he stepped from the boat, and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So Jesus began teaching them many things. After they had crossed the lake, they landed at Gennesaret. They brought the boat to shore and climbed out. The people recognized Jesus at once, and they ran throughout the whole area, carrying sick people on mats to wherever they heard he was. Wherever Jesus went—in villages, cities, or the countryside—they brought the sick out to the marketplaces. They begged Jesus to let the sick touch at least the fringe of his robe, and all who touched Jesus were healed.”

Jesus had compassion for everyone. All were healed. All were nourished by the shepherd. All were united in one fold.

The disciples crossed the lake. We have been exploring a myriad of ways God calls us to cross over in past weeks. How is God calling you to cross over today? What do you need to acknowledge, name, leave behind, and let go? One cannot fully receive and appreciate the present without letting go of the past. What is emerging? How are you letting God propel you to the other shore? How are you seeking support from others? How are you supporting others? How is God calling you to cross over?

God is constantly pouring blessings into our life. One’s ability to receive involves interior adjustments. A crossover from separation to community. A crossover from difference to sameness. A crossover from apathy to compassion. The disciples crossed over from a “leave people behind” mentality, an isolation mindset, to be nourished “I need to get away” approach. The disciples crossed over to everyone is included, a sameness mindset, we can be nourished together, I can be nourished through every aspect of my daily routine, I can be nourished through my relationships. The disciples crossed over from keeping their distance to overcoming their differences. God is calling us to cross over to the shore of infinite, sameness compassion. God, our shepherd pours compassion into everyone’s lives. Compassion welcomes all. Sharing compassion heals.

For this sermon, sameness is God’s grace makes us all the same, beloved members of God’s family, equals, sheep. We are created in God’s image. God is three unique, distinct persons and the same God through love. Each of us is a unique, distinct person and the same by compassionate love. Each person’s diversity is celebrated with the same appreciation. Humanity, though many, is all a part of the same body. Each person is a unique stone being built into the same house, God’s house. For this sermon, difference is elevating self above another. Difference is valuing one person over or under another.

Much has been written about compassion fatigue and the troubles of doing mission to others. When one views themselves as superior and the other as needy, compassion and mission involves bringing one’s greater being into another’s lesser being, then lifting them up. This is heavy lifting, fatiguing, and exhausting. This is draining for both the compassion giver and receiver, the mission servant and the mission recipient.

God is calling us to cross over to the shore of infinite, sameness compassion. Sameness compassion is realizing we are all the same, beloved children of God. We all have needs. We all hunger for God. We all are connected to God. We all can help each other connect with God. Everyone is a mixture of gifts and needs. When we realize we are the same we help each other, do mission for each other, have compassion for each other.

Bede Griffiths, a Benedictine monk, tells of this cross over from difference compassion to sameness compassion. Bede connected with God and others through a prayer he continuously prayed: “God, have mercy on me a sinner.” That prayer reminded him, despite a lifetime of spiritual development, that he is one with everyone else wandering the world of shadows. Together, we all hunger for the mystery of God that enfolds us. It is the recognition of sameness that is the wellspring of compassion. Red Green sums it up with his saying, “Remember I am pulling for you. We are all in this together.”

The Apostle Paul writes a letter to connect people with God, to help them cross over from difference to sameness, to feast upon God’s compassion. **Ephesians 2:11-22 NLT “Do not forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called “uncircumcised heathens” by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to God through the blood of Christ. For Christ has brought peace to us. Jesus united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. Jesus did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. Jesus**

made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. Jesus brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from God and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to God through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are God's house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus. We are carefully joined together in Jesus, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through Jesus you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by God's Spirit."

The already and not yet. Yes, Jesus made the outsiders, insiders, the strangers, friends, the foreigners, citizens. Jesus made clear that judged orphans are beloved members of God's family. Whether one knows the law or not, a covenant keeper or not, strives to love or enjoys sin, hostile or not, circumcised or not, heathen or not, hopeful or not, peaceful or not; all people are joined together by Jesus and made citizens of God's holy people. All people are being built into God's house with Jesus as the cornerstone. All people are a part of one body. We are to carefully join together becoming a holy temple for the Lord. The Apostle Paul filled this letter with sameness illustrations and imagery. Jesus has already made us the same and we have not yet lived into the sameness.

The Apostle Paul was writing to people who were stuck in the difference, hurting each other, judging each other, complaining about each other, hostile and fighting. People who argued over every difference, divided and sorted people. People who elevated and valued some while excluding, name calling and dehumanizing others. People who believed some people must be beyond God's grace. How do you think the Apostle Paul's message of sameness was received? We are still fighting over similar issues today. How do we move from difference to sameness? How do we move from thinking I am above you, let me help you up, to we are both on a spiritual journey, we each have unique abilities, unique perspectives, let us share them, put them together, so we can all journey together. Saying sorry, forgiveness and compassion are part of the journey to being one worldwide loving community.

Australia has a national Sorry Day, a day of healing, reconciliation, and unity. Sorry Day seeks to name injustice and define problems that separate. Sorry Day is a day to say sorry, reconcile and collaborate on solutions. Sorry Day promotes healing. Psychologist Tyler Okimoto has documented that Sorry Day is helping to rebuild relationships. Who do you need to say sorry to?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: "In a world without forgiveness, evil begets evil, harm generates harm, and there is no way short of exhaustion or forgetfulness of breaking the sequence. Forgiveness breaks the chain. Forgiveness introduces into the logic of interpersonal encounter the unpredictability of grace. Forgiveness represents a decision not to do what instinct and passion urge us to do. Forgiveness answers hate with a refusal-to-hate, animosity with generosity. Few more daring ideas have ever entered the human situation. Forgiveness means that we are not destined endlessly to replay the grievances of yesterday. Forgiveness is the ability to live with the past without being held captive by the past. It would not be an exaggeration to say that forgiveness is the most compelling testimony to human freedom. Forgiveness is about the action that is not reaction. Forgiveness is the refusal to be defined by circumstance. Forgiveness represents our ability to change course, reframe the narrative of the past and create an unexpected set of possibilities for the future. ... In the face of tragedy, forgiveness is the counternarrative of hope. Forgiveness is not a moral luxury. At times forgiveness is the only path through the thickets of hate to the open spaces of coexistence." Who do you need to forgive?

Jesus is the ultimate Good Shepherd. Jesus forgave everyone from the cross. Jesus offers everyone resurrections and everlasting life. Jesus is our sibling who unites all people across time and space. Jesus is our shepherd guiding us from hostility to love, from revenge to grace, from division to reconciliation, from sadness to joy, from apathy to compassion, from hurt to healing, from loss to found, from exclusion to belonging, from brokenness to wholeness, from chaos to peace, from despair to hope, from difference to sameness, from death to glorious, abundant, eternal life. As sheep, we are guided to feast upon God's compassion and be compassionate. Jesus has compassion for everyone.

The psalmist sings: **Psalm 23 MSG "God, my shepherd! I do not need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my**

breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way goes through Death Valley, I am not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trusty shepherd's crook makes me feel secure. You serve me a six-course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head; my cup brims with blessing. Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I am back home in the house of God for the rest of my life." Surely we will all dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Together let us connect with our good shepherd, feast upon compassion and be compassionate. Amen