

“In Search of Healing” A Sermon for the Old Presbyterian Meeting House
Sunday, July 22, 2012 Pentecost, Year B

Old Testament: Psalm 23

New Testament: Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

They were tired. All they wanted was a little rest, a tiny little vacation. After all, the work that Jesus and his disciples had been doing was hard work and there had been an awful lot of it: from throwing a whole tribe of demons into a herd of swine, to healing a woman who'd been suffering from 12 years of an illness that made her a social outcast; traveling from village to village teaching. So much work, so many needs. And everywhere the crowds came and they grew larger and more urgent in each new place.

So, in the place where today's text picks up the ongoing story Mark is telling about Jesus, after the disciples come back from their work and report in to their teacher, he suggests a little vacation: “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. ‘

It sounded like such a good idea. The problem was that the folks who'd heard about Jesus and all the amazing things he'd been doing got wind of this little vacation plan. And while Jesus and his disciples were on the boat crossing the sea, the people went ahead of them by foot from towns and villages, to the place that was no longer deserted but now host to a crowd. And as Mark puts it in this gospel passage, “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.”

At risk of mixing up bucolic pastoral images with nautical ones, Mark uses a funny little phrase as the explanation for Jesus' compassion: "they were like sheep without a shepherd." Sheep imagery in scripture poses all sorts of problems for contemporary interpreters like me and you whose urban lives generally mean that the closest we've been to a sheep in years was the last time we ate lamb chops or donned a thick wool sweater in the winter. People in earlier times or more rural locations listening to this story would know some things about sheep that would help make sense of this phrase. They'd know, for instance, that sheep are not exactly the brightest creatures on the farm. They need a lot of looking after. Sheep can't really protect themselves from predators; and so they scare easily, and have a tendency to panic when they are afraid, running off and thereby easily getting themselves into even more trouble. Sheep, in other words, really do need a shepherd to watch out for them. So Mark's phrase, "they were like sheep without a shepherd" is meant to indicate just how lost and in trouble were the people who gathered on the shore waiting for him.

This phrase also tells us something important about Jesus. Even though this passage does not go as far as some other New Testament gospel and epistle writers that , directly name Jesus as "The Good Shepherd," here in Mark's gospel, the implication is that when Jesus steps in to teach and to heal, he is acting as a shepherd to this lost flock. Mark goes on to tell us that later, after Jesus and the disciples got back in the boat and went on to another place, people recognized him and continued to come to him, bringing their sick family members and friends and neighbors on mats to whatever place Jesus was. They flocked around him, hoping even to touch the fringe of his clothing, because "all who touched it were healed." This growing crowd of people, this lost and anxious flock of sheep, came to Jesus in search of healing.

How odd, then, that his first response to their need for healing is to *teach* them. Bruce Morrill, a theologian and colleague at Vanderbilt University, writing about the healing ministry of Jesus, notes that teaching and healing were tandem activities in the mission of Jesus. Morrill underscores the distance between New Testament understandings of healing and our own western conceptions that are all caught up in notions of ‘cure’. To cure an illness is to remedy its biological cause—to get rid of it. Health, in this rendering, comes to mean a biological state free of any illness, injury or disability. Morrill contends that in the NT world, people would not have brought this same expectation to the idea of healing. Certainly they would understand ‘healing’ to mean an intervention affecting an illness. But unlike our expectation that healing necessarily means curing, Morrill states that for the crowds surrounding Jesus, healing was primarily about bringing new meaning to the misfortune experienced in illness, such that the person attained a new or renewed sense of value and purpose in his or her world. I am sure that people experiencing the miraculous interventions of Jesus found real physical change—perhaps cure, if you will—in their interactions with him. But the New Testament picture of healing goes far beyond this more limited understanding: it extends to the idea of being connected, of having a sense of belonging to the community and of meaning in life and wholeness even with one’s particular ailments and problems. People came to Jesus in search of healing because when he touched them and when he taught them, they were made whole.

In times when we feel most deeply our need for healing and wholeness, we in the church often turn to Psalm 23. And of course Psalm 23 also uses a metaphor of sheep and shepherds. In what is undoubtedly the most well known piece of scripture besides the Lord’s Prayer, the Twenty Third Psalm offers comfort and calm with its gentle imagery of God as the

shepherd who brings the sheep to green pastures and still waters, keeps the sheep safe, and providing abundant food and drink. The reason the images are so comforting is, as the psalmist says, there is real danger, real evil out there—the safety and guidance that take sheep to green pastures and through valleys happen in the presence of the “shadow of death,” and the overflowing cup and full table are set “in the presence of enemies.” It is not accidental that we in the church so often turn to this psalm in funeral services, or at hospital bedsides, or at other times of crisis: these are the times when we are most aware of our brokenness, most in touch with our own vulnerabilities, most able to recognize our needs for a shepherd to watch over us. In times like that, the church looks to this Psalm as an expression of our need for help and healing.

Craig Barnes, who teaches at Pittsburg theological Seminary, writes that Psalm 23 needs to be understood in its Jewish context as a text for and about a *people* who were called Israel, which means, “those who have struggled with God.” They struggled for peace, for food and for a future, writes Barnes. “Most important, they struggled for their faith in God. The Hebrews longed to live with God as sheep live with a shepherd, but their life was hard. And they were too afraid to keep believing that this Shepherd was leading them to green pastures, or that goodness and mercy would always follow them.” So they went in other directions, followed after other gods, losing their way again and again, eventually turning in repentance that would bring them back to longing for that Shepherd. As Barnes puts it, “It is not surprising that so many of the psalms describe the churning, disruptive experience of being lost and found, judged and forgiven, sent away and brought back. It is all a part of the pathos of people who got scared and lost their way, and of the high drama of a God who searches to find [God’s] lost

sheep."These are hardly soporific images of sheep and shepherds sit in quiet, comfort-inducing pastoral scenes beside bubbly brooks. Instead, the image here is one of a proactive shepherd: it is in times when the sheep individually and together face real evil and danger that the shepherd steps in to protect and care for the particular sheep and the whole flock.

Friday was one of those times when evil and real danger became manifest, with the news about yet another horrible act of gun violence in the movie theatre shooting in Aurora, Colorado. In the senseless waste of lives, we ache for the families and loved ones of the twelve people who died there and the many others who were injured in this tragedy. And this morning we join other churches around the nation in prayer for them in a time of unfathomable grief and suffering. We can be shocked—but none of us should be surprised. All gun violence brings horrible loss and pain. This incident, like others that have happened in schools and workplaces around our country, is shocking in its arbitrariness, and in the everyday ordinariness of these settings. It is so tempting to treat this situation as an incident of individual woundings; to pray for the healing of those individuals personally affected by the shooting, and to view the healing that needs to take place as something that needs to happen to the victims and their families. But the brokenness exposed by the shooting in Aurora Colorado is not just an individual, one-off situation in need of repair in the individual lives of those affected directly. This is not only the problem of those experiencing the horrors of the personal and direct impact of this shooting. Gun violence is part of our corporate brokenness, our communal sickness; its existence expresses a deep wound in our nation and society that must be healed.

In 2010 the General Assembly of our denomination, the PCUSA, adopted a resolution, "Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call." The resolution recognizes

the topic of guns and gun violence as an issues about which there is disagreement in American political culture and even within our churches, but it calls on Presbyterians to become more informed and more active in our responses to gun violence. While we are silent on this issue, in the US there are 30,000 gun deaths per year and another 300,000 gun-related assaults.

Importantly, the text of the GA's gun violence resolution looks at how arguments in our society about guns generally come down to notion of protecting individual right. The resolution notes, for example that even though many have died by assault weapons since 2004 expiration of ban on them, lobbyists persistently say "restrictions on military-style weapons are assault on individual freedom." (PCUSA 2010). One of the weapons used in Friday's movie theatre shooting was an AK47-type of military assault weapon that would have been banned by law prior to 2004, but now was easily and legally obtained by the shooter. The church's resolution raises the question of whether in the US right now we might need to "pay attention to these contradictions" and "allow our consciences to be troubled" into new responses. It points to Xn and Reformed theological understandings that understand faith not merely in individual terms but also corporately—such that sometimes we are called to set aside individual privilege to for the sake of larger common good; it calls on churches to talk about the issues involved in gun violence and respond to prevent further tragedy. We need to be addressing issues of violence, including gun violence, from the perspective of our Christian faith and practices in this congregation because whether we've been fortunate enough to be insulated from it personally, or had our own lives broken apart by direct experiences with violence, our calling as Christians is to participate in the healing of these wounds; to bind up the brokenhearted and stand with

those who are wounded; and to tend the shared wound of our society's deep sickness so desperate to be healed.

When Jesus stepped out of the boat and saw the crowd on the shore, he was tired. What the text says next is important for our community, called like the disciples who were with Jesus in the boat, to share in the work of healing: Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.—they had no one to protect and care for them, and so Jesus, tired as he was, got out of the boat and began again to shepherd them—to teach and to heal.

Most of the time, reading scriptural images of sheep and shepherds, we rightly identify ourselves with the dumb sheep—the ones wandering around lost and in danger, and we recognize Jesus as the Shepherd. But here in today's text, Mark seems to imply that the disciples are something like “shepherds in training.” When he mentions them, he uses the term “apostles” to name them. It's the only place in this entire gospel where the term appears, and New Testament scholars argue that its meaning is not one of special status, but is about being an authorized representative. The disciples, the authorized representatives of Jesus, were in training as shepherds. They were the ones being sent out in the name of Jesus to heal and to teach. Maybe in our baptisms we like Mark are supposed to mix together water and sheep metaphors, for it is our baptisms that commissions each one of us to be shepherds in the world, to do this work of healing in the world.

All of us in the human community are broken in some way; all are wounded and in search of healing. We Christians, who celebrate and follow Jesus as the Lord of Life, are no exception. But we are called to a double life: knowing we are sheep, in need of healing, we are

simultaneously called as disciples to be shepherds-in-training, to participate as healers of the world's brokenness, to allow ourselves to be so moved to compassion by the suffering we see that, tired as we are, we must act and respond.