

Hefted Shepherds

Sunday, May 5, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

John 21:1-19

James Rebanks is a shepherd in the Lake District of England, working the land where his father and grandfather tended sheep. His book, *The Shepherd's Life*, explores shepherding rhythms that haven't changed much over the course of hundreds of generations. Despite the advances in technology and progress that characterize the 21st century world, shepherding is still an ancient and unchanging way of life that is always about the sheep and the land.

Most of us think of shepherding as an idyllic profession from a bygone age. We picture the green pastures and still waters of Psalm 23. We miss the fact that shepherding is also muddy, bloody, smelly, and difficult work. It takes a practiced hand and an eye for detail that must be honed over time. Shepherding is not for the faint of heart or for those who just want to dabble in it. But for those who take it on and become "hefted" shepherds, the life is rewarding and satisfying.

Reading Rebanks' account of a shepherding life, it's easy to see some parallels to the kind of shepherding to which Jesus calls his disciples. Shepherding is a life that requires some apprenticeship, the ability to learn from one's mistakes, and a certain "get-up and get-going" voice in the disciple's head. Tending Jesus' flock is hard and difficult work, and Jesus pulls no punches about it. To do that work, the Good Shepherd is looking for men and women for whom the disciple Peter can be a helpful example.

Jesus asks Peter the same question three times: "*Do you love me?*" (vv. 15-18). The harkens back to Peter's earlier threefold denial of Jesus (13:38). These three questions act as a kind of restoration for Peter, but also as a commission for a new kind of work that Jesus calls him and the other disciples to do. Unlike the other gospels, there is no indication in John's Gospel that Peter is the primary or lead disciple upon which the church will be built. The task Jesus gives Peter is one that will be given to all Jesus' followers: to feed and to tend Jesus' sheep.

Peter knew how to be a fisherman. When things got confusing for him after the resurrection, Peter went back to what he knew (v. 3). But Jesus showed him that being an expert fisherman wasn't enough. The disciples learned how to "fish for people" by following Jesus, but what do you do with the "fish" once they've been caught? This is when Jesus changes the paradigm from fishing to shepherding: two ancient ways of making a living coming together to form a way of life for his disciples.

Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus revealed that he is the Good Shepherd (10:1-21). Now he creates a guild of under-shepherds to carry on the work for generations to come, shepherds who will tend and feed his flock. To feed Jesus' sheep means not merely to gather them together like a net full of fish, but to nurture and care for them. One is a momentary haul; the other is a lifetime commitment. In changing the metaphor and by expressing it three times, Jesus hammers home the point: Peter and the other disciples will be in the shepherding business for the long haul; they will experience sacrifice and self-denial; they will often find it to be dirty and difficult work; and they will need to get up and get out.

The same is true for all of us who follow Jesus today. While the word "pastor" implies that he or she is a shepherd, the truth is that the shepherding task is for all who follow Jesus. All of us have a flock that we tend, be it a family, a group of coworkers, a neighborhood, or a circle of friends. Feeding them and tending them is a key commission for Christians.

So, how do we feed those sheep? In his book, Rebanks offers three rules of shepherding which focus on the attitude and commitment of the shepherd, not the quality of the sheep. Rebanks' first rule of shepherding makes this clear: **It's not about you. It's about the sheep and the land.** A real shepherd knows that sheep must be fed, and the land cultivated to feed them, and that often means sacrificing one's own agenda to get up and go work the field no matter the weather or the date. In a shepherd's life, the sheep always come first.

The gospels reveal that Peter and the other disciples dreamed of benefitting from Jesus' fame and kingship. Jesus, however, constantly reminded them that it wasn't about them, but rather about the people they would be fishing for and then shepherding. Jesus' command to "feed *my* lambs" indicates that the shepherding task is not about gathering one's own flock of admirers, but about modeling oneself after the Good Shepherd, the one for whom the sheep always come first.

If we're going to be shepherds, we must be willing to see discipleship and ministry not as the means to building our own spiritual and emotional capital, but as sacrificial work. Rebanks says that it's easy to tell the difference between a dedicated shepherd and a poser: "Everything and everyone is at times covered in [dung] and snot. You learn to accept that you will get spattered in [dung] at times, or slaver, or afterbirth, or snot. That you will smell of your animals. You can always tell how alien someone is to our world by how terrified of the muck they look."

If you're going to be a shepherd-disciple, you've got to be willing to get down and dirty with the sheep, to take on their mess, and have their stink on you. Many people will come to faith in a mess. We can't be terrified of the muck. We must always remember that it's not about us and our sensibilities and preferences; it's always about the sheep!

This leads to Rebanks' second rule of shepherding: **Sometimes you can't win**. Working with sheep and working the land means that there are a lot of things that are out of your control, things like weather or a disease that hits the flock. Despite all your hard work, sometimes things don't go according to plan.

We'd love it if being a disciple of Jesus and a good shepherd meant that we could expect everything to work out well all the time, but Jesus never promises that. Sometimes the sheep in our care go astray. Sometimes we ourselves are struck by disease, pain, or failure. Sometimes we will lose by being out of step with the prevailing culture, or, in some cases, it might even mean losing our lives.

Jesus told Peter that feeding his lambs would result in the apostle being taken where he did not want to go and stretching out his hands to be nailed to a cross like his Lord (v. 18). Peter told Jesus he was willing to die with him (13:37). Now Jesus told his impetuous disciple that he would get his wish, dying in the same way that Jesus did.

The reality for shepherd-disciples is that even in dying, we win. Peter's death would "*glorify God*" (v. 19). Jesus' own death was the means by which God defeated evil, sin, and death in the ultimate victory. In losing our lives, either spiritually in service to others or physically in dying for Christ, as many Christians in our world are doing today, we are winning. "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends,*" Jesus told his disciples (15:13). A good shepherd always lays down his life for his sheep (10:11). The ultimate

expression of loving one another as Christ loved us is found in giving our lives away for others and letting God be glorified in the victory.

Rebanks' third rule of shepherding is: **Shut up and do the work**. There's plenty of opportunity to complain and compare in the world of shepherding. It's tempting to look over the fence at another's flock and wonder about your own. It's tempting to want to stay in bed instead of getting up to head out on a wet, freezing morning and check on the lambs, or to whine about how hard it all is. Real shepherds shut up and do the work required.

The work of loving others as Christ has loved us will always be difficult, and it will always be tempting to complain and compare. Jesus urges us not to focus on the hard stuff and not to waste our words on complaining, but to remember that our goal is always to glorify God.

English shepherds use the word "hefting" to describe the way in which a flock of sheep becomes accustomed and acclimated to a patch of land. Shepherds can also be "hefted" in this way, their lives and fortunes tied to a place and a flock that they love. Jesus is looking for good shepherds who will become "hefted" to a place and a people, giving their lives away in order to help others thrive for God's glory. We are hefted shepherds in this time, for this community. God gives us a flock of people to shepherd. This is hard work, good work, and it is work that needs to be done.

Prayer: Good Shepherd, teach us to follow you: to care for all that are close to us; to protect those who are threatened; to welcome those who are rejected; to forgive those who are burdened by guilt; to heal those who are broken and sick; to share with those who have little or nothing; to take the time to really know one another and love as you have loved us. Good Shepherd, teach us to follow you to spread compassion to those who are far away; to speak for those who are voiceless; to defend those who are oppressed and abused; to work for justice for those who are exploited; to make peace for those who suffer violence; to take the time to recognize our connectedness; and to love as you have loved us. Good Shepherd, teach us to follow you and to be faithful to calling you gave us to be shepherds in your name. Amen.

Sources:

- Rebanks, James. *The Shepherd's Life: A Tale of the Lake District*. Penguin Books, 2015.
- Prayer by John van de Laar, © 2009 Sacredise on his Sacredise.com website. Site visited April 29, 2019.