



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - March 12, 2017 Sermon

The Shepherd Shepherding/The Teacher Teaching

Ezekiel 34: 1-2, 6, 11, 14-15, John 10:1-18

It happens all the time, so much so that we never think about it, but if we do think about it, it tells us a lot about our being human.

You're out somewhere—at a party, a play, at church—and you spot someone across the room: you know him but you just can't remember his name. So you lean over to the person you're with, "You see that guy over there, no not him, him—the guy next to him, yes, yes, him, that guy—what's his name? I can't remember his name . . . Is it Robert?

"No, no it's not Robert," your friend says. "Is it Ronald?"

No, that's not right. I know it's not Ronald. Reggie?

No, I don't think so. You sure it begins with an R?

I don't know . . .

And you go on like this for a while. Both of you going a little crazy: It'll come . . . it'll come . . . we'll get it. Happens all the time . . . and yet if you think about it, it's a mysterious—and revelatory—phenomenon. It reveals our humanity to us.

So think about it: Neither of you know this guy's name. And yet you know his name enough to say what it's not: it's NOT Robert, or Ronald or Reggie. Now I ask you: how do you know what his name is NOT if you don't know what his name IS?!?! Think about it.

The answer of course is that you *both* know it and don't know it; you know it somehow, some way, to some degree, somewhere inside you . . . BUT not fully, not in the way or to the extent that you want to know it here and now.

You both know it and you don't know it. And you're trying to recollect it. Of course when you finally do, it's like a mini-joy festival—you almost high-five each other: "Richard! Yes! —That's it! That's right! Richard! I'm sure of it! It's Richard . . . At least I think it's Richard . . ."

The ancient philosopher Socrates uses this phenomenon as a metaphor for all human learning and really for our very humanity. "All learning," he said, "is recollection: the truth—

all truth—is buried in our souls, and what we call learning is really just the process of recollecting it.” And when we do recollect it, we know it—it rings true, it’s like we’ve known it all along, but couldn’t quite get it, and now that we do, it’s wonderful; hence the mini-joy festival.

Now we moderns tend to scoff at such an idea: “How can all the facts about the world, all the data we collect, be buried in our souls?!? That’s ridiculous!” Of course, we never stop to think that perhaps knowledge is more than just facts; learning, more than just data-collection. Socrates at least has the wisdom to convey a mystery—here, the mystery of learning—with a metaphor.

And so does Jesus: I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, The sheep follow the good shepherd because they know his voice.

They’re saying the same thing, Socrates and Jesus: If you want to put it non-metaphorically: we human beings have a prior affinity with the truth. “A prior affinity with the truth,” by that I mean a pre-existing relationship with, an innate predisposition to, a capacity for, a receptivity to, a need for, a yearning, a hunger, a love for the truth. Use whatever words you like—but whatever you call it, without it, we’re lost. But with it, we’re found: That’s why, when we finally do hear it/remember it, it rings true—it’s like recognizing something—someone—you’ve known all along. We know that voice.

And yet . . . for knowing Jesus’ voice, the disciples sure are slow to understand what he’s saying. They may *have* a prior affinity with the truth, but they sure are slow to pick up on it: Chapter 10 verse 6: This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

During Lent, I’m preaching on Jesus’ “I am statements” in the Gospel of John, and needless to say, those statements have been dissected and scrutinized by scholars and theologians through the centuries. Chapter 10 for example, “I am the gate,” twice!, and—twice, again!—“I am the good shepherd.” What do these mean? What do they symbolize? How do they symbolize? How do they differ? How are they related? How can Jesus possibly be both? Why the repetition? And on and on and on . . .

And yet nobody ever stops to think that Jesus is simply a desperate teacher, looking out on a sea of blank, uncomprehending faces, pitching metaphor after metaphor—ok, that’s not working, let’s try this one . . . in hopes that somehow, some way, they’ll finally get it; it will finally get through and ring true.

And this is the first reason I find this passage so comforting: It’s not just me, not just us! We’re not alone!! I mean, all those times—all those hours, all those years!—of incomprehension in the classroom both as a student and as a teacher, it’s OK! . . . You know there’s a well-established doctrine that God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit is the one, the only, true teacher; all the rest of us who stand at the front of the classroom are just so many teach-

ing assistants. But if the one and only true teacher sometimes couldn't get through to his students, and if the disciples in the very presence of the one and only true teacher sometimes couldn't get what he was saying . . . well, there's hope for us, even with our incomprehension. I tell you, it's a great comfort.

Not so comforting—in fact not comforting at all—are the wolves in shepherd's clothing. Did you catch that? It's in both passages. In the Ezekiel passage it's where God condemns the human shepherds who have led Israel astray for their own self-enrichment and self-aggrandizement, God says that, from now on, God and only God will be their shepherd. And in the John passage, Jesus speaks of thieves who try to steal the sheep under cover of darkness. Bad shepherds, wolves in shepherds's clothing—this should make us uncomfortable because . . . well, because we humans are like sheep. As the literary critic Northrop Frye, in explaining the ubiquity and antiquity of this comparison of humans to sheep, put it: "Perhaps the use of this particular metaphor is due to the fact that, being stupid, affectionate, gregarious, and easily stampeded, the societies formed by sheep are most like human ones." Worse still, bad shepherds—the wolves in shepherd's clothing—don't have to break in to the sheepfold; they can rise up from among us.

How can you tell the bad shepherds? That's easy: you know that prior affinity with, that pre-existing relationship with, that innate predisposition to, that capacity for, that receptivity to, that need, yearning, hunger, and love for the truth, I was talking about? In the bad shepherd, it no longer seems to be operative. Instead, words become tools, weapons for getting what you want, for self-enrichment and self-aggrandizement. If saying something gets you what you want, or hurts someone you want to hurt, or makes you look good, especially at the expense of others, if saying it gets you adulation, or at least distracts people from seeing what you don't want them to see about you, *then by all means say it*—who cares whether it's true? The question doesn't even arise. If the good shepherd leads us by true words, then the bad shepherds—and their number is legion—mislead us by false words. And the most discomfoting thing is that *we are* like sheep: this disregard for, this utter indifference to, this disdain for, the truth is infectious. It spreads through the flock like a plague—and with electronic mass media, it spreads exponentially faster—it goes viral.

I've said it before, but I'll say it again: The most prevalent symptom, and the foremost cause, of the corruption of democracy is the corruption of human speech, and the consequences of that corruption are distrust, discord, division, and ultimately violence and anarchy. And you can tell the toll that this corruption takes when our society is more and more characterized not just by indifference towards the truth, but by disdain and cynicism about, the truth. A kind of demoralized weariness creeps in: Everybody lies and everybody spies, what does it matter?—say whatever you want to say. No one cares. No one expects anything different.

Truth had taken a beating on that day, too. Shuttled contemptuously back and forth between those in power as they jockeyed for still more power, Truth stood, bleeding and

barely able to make himself heard before the Roman governor, one Pontius Pilate. And with indifference, disdain, and cynicism tinging his words, that Roman governor asked, in a tone of demoralized weariness, "What is truth?" And then he sent Truth away to be crucified.

Were you there when they crucified our Lord? Yes—every time we succumb to that indifference, disdain and cynicism, to that demoralized weariness, the answer is "yes." Oh, yes, yes, we have a prior affinity with the truth, I said that—that is what makes us human. But we would also do well to remember that our humanity is at stake.

Our humanity is at stake, but we have a good shepherd. Remember that: we have a good shepherd. A good shepherd who comes to us, who seeks us out, in love. We may be slow to learn, we may not love the truth as we ought, we may feel overcome by falsehood-fatigue, but we have a good shepherd. A good shepherd who says to us, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." A good shepherd who comes to us in love to save us and to lead us to good pasture, that is the truth.

So confirmands, remember these two things, and take comfort in them: It's not just me, not just us. We're not alone!! And also this: We have a good shepherd, he comes to us and he speaks to us; we know his voice. He lays down his life for us, and takes it up again—for us, so that we may have life and life abundant.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Shepherd. Amen