

Last Sunday of Creation Season - November 20th, 2011

Ezekial 34:11-16, 20-24 Ps 100 Eph 1:15-23 Mt. 25:31-46

Since St. Francis's Sunday, October 2nd, we have been focusing on Four Values For Creation Season:

1. Realizing and appreciating the interconnectedness and interdependence of all creation.
2. Believing in the essential goodness of creation.
3. Accepting responsibility for being a good steward of what the Creator has made.
4. Giving thanks for creation, having a thankful heart, and counting your blessings.

Our Sunday School children have made a picture wall of how they see creation and themselves connected together. There are posters lining the corridor downstairs that show all the ways over the years that our children have contributed directly to the care of God's good creation. We had a skit about being good stewards of what God has given us: sharing and caring through our actions for the wellbeing of others. We had Mission Sunday and Stewardship Sunday. This coming week we celebrate Thanksgiving with two services: the Community Thanksgiving Service at Crossroads Lutheran Church where we will have a special ingathering of Food for the University Food Pantry and our own Thanksgiving Eucharist on Wednesday evening. That service will mark the end of our Creation Season for this year, as we gather together to count our blessings and be thankful. Throughout the Season we have stressed the importance of sharing from our abundance and engaging in the corporal works of mercy cited by Jesus Christ in this morning's Gospel reading.

In order to understand today's Gospel reading fully, we have to look back at the First Reading, the lesson from the Book of the Prophet Ezekial. When I was teaching in seminary, I used to use Ezekial 34 to talk about the integrity of the priesthood and leadership in the Church. Earlier in this Chapter, Ezekial was castigating the shepherds of Israel for not being the leaders they were called to be. "Ah, you shepherds of Israel, who have been tending yourselves! Is it not the flock that the shepherds ought to tend? You partake of the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool...but you do not tend the flock. You have not sustained the weak, healed the sick, or bandaged the injured; you have not brought back the strayed, or looked for the lost..."¹ These shepherds of Israel were the leaders of the people. They were the very ones who were called to be responsible for taking care of the needs of others: tending the sick, the weak, and the lost and they were being accused of only taking care of themselves and ignoring those who were in need.

Because the shepherds of Israel were not tending the flock, the prophet declared that God would take over being the great shepherd of the sheep. The words of the Psalmist also proclaim: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (Ps 23) These are just two passages in the Hebrew Scriptures where we find imagery undergirding the later claim of Jesus to be one with the Father – God incarnate among us tending to us tenderly and completely – the true Good Shepherd of the sheep.

Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel assure us that the day of reckoning will come. Those who will be judged FAVORABLY will be those who in their lifetime actively engaged in the corporal works of mercy. We talked about those on Mission Sunday:

- 1) Feeding the hungry
- 2) Clothing the naked
- 3) Giving drink to the thirsty
- 4) Visiting prisoners

¹ Ezekial 34:2b-4a *The Jewish Study Bible: Tanakh Translation* Jewish Publication Society Oxford Press 2004.

- 5) Welcoming the stranger
- 6) Healing the sick; and
- 7) Burying the dead

But those who tend to themselves to the exclusion of the needs of others will be judged UNFAVORABLY – just like the so-called leaders of Israel in the time of Ezekial, the prophet.

True leadership means putting the needs of the 'have nots' ahead of the needs of the leaders. This is the Gospel Truth and God in the person of Jesus Christ taught this and lived it. The God of the Israelites found in the Hebrew Scriptures taught the same message through the voice and writings of the prophets.

These past couple of weeks we've been hearing stories on the news about devastating sexual misconduct among the leaders of young people at Penn State University. This publicity has engendered many phone calls and conversations that go WAY beyond Penn State. I received a phone call earlier in the week from someone who knew about horrible misconduct back in the early 1960's and this person wanted my council about making contact with the particular school involved to be sure they were aware of all that happened. The consequences of self-focused leadership, of negligent shepherding, can be disastrous from one generation to the next. The silence, the failure to intervene, can be as toxic as the actions themselves. "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "just as you did NOT do it for one of the least of these, you did not do it for me."

There are many shepherd roles: teachers are called to be shepherds of the students in their classroom; parents shepherd their children; governmental leaders shepherd the populace; clergy shepherd a congregation. Think about your own life – where might you have the opportunity to serve as a shepherd, as a leader of others? How's your stewardship of that role? How are you doing?

My prayer is that in our faith community we may be shown ways to support one another in all our leadership and shepherding roles, inside and outside of St. Peter's. My prayer is that by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we will hear Jesus commend us with these words: "Just as you did it for one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it for me."

Amen