

“One Sheep at a Time”  
 Sermon for 27 September 2015  
 Texts: Matthew 9:36 & John 9

**Matt. 9:36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.**

It is a commonplace to observe that seasons come in which there is “a famine of the Word” in the land. *I suggest that the famine of the Word relates particularly to shepherding.* I have recently completed a shepherding/leadership training course for some of the men at EWBC. Because we, in the leadership, sense that the shepherding model is what we ought to be about (in church, at home, at work), we want to draw from the Word insight, guidance and direction. It is particularly incumbent upon us as we have a baptismal service today and two new sheep are wanting and willing to be added to this flock. Integrated into the flock. So, in God’s timing, we turn to this topic: shepherding.

Note first the example and motivation: Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the motivation is His compassion for the **harassed and helpless**, shepherdless sheep. There are some shockingly shabby and sick sheep out there, in dire straits and poor pastures. Our text remarks, that Jesus **saw the crowds**. The crowds have not diminished, nor is their plight any the less horrible today than then. And Christ, whose compassion has healed us, touched, moved and changed us is pointing us toward those blighted persons, urging us to **tend His sheep**. He desires to shepherd through us. Therefore, I suppose, we can see that saving sheep is only the beginning—the rescued sheep has ongoing needs to be shepherded. The formation, and maintenance of godly, Christ-centered relationships is the agenda—our real “business.” We are to be shepherding, and to be shepherded.

So, I jumped in to John 10. Jesus’ discourse on the Good Shepherd. How could anyone go wrong with that? Well, unfortunately, I could . . . and did. John 10 is a terrible place to begin. It is rather like walking into a stirred hornet’s nest and trying to pretend that everything’s normal. John 10 is a phase of heated, high controversy. Besides, Jesus is kinder than to just jump in on an abstract level. There is a walk up to chapter 10. Yes, it is chapter 9. Let’s go there.

See how casually it begins. Just like one of our ordinary days! **As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.** (v.1) How Jesus knew this, we are not told. It is not a major matter. What we have here is a beggar, someone who has always been a beggar (and a drag on his family’s resources) who depended on the alms of the pious to afford to live. That could be good. He also has never seen anything; he is blind. Now, there is nothing like a harassed and helpless sheep to spark a conversation—or, as in this case, a theological inquiry. **Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?** Oh, my goodness, what a question! Can you imagine that being asked at the presidential debates? It seems, well, rather

indelicate. The man is blind, not deaf. Did they ask this question in his hearing? It may be that the very question precipitated the ministry which follows. God is so gracious, ever kind. No, really. As it turns out, of course, the man born blind is not held in contempt by Jesus. He is not idle object of curiosity, or mere speculation. No, as it turns out, he is a sick sheep whom Jesus fully intends to shepherd.

Now that's our clue, as well as our cue. We are often poorly focused. Our interactions with others are, if God so will, opportunities to gather sheep (not merely "wool" as in silly religious chatter!). *If the disciples were tempted to be idle with this man, Jesus abruptly derails them: **Neither this man, nor his parents sinned.*** (v.3) Obviously Jesus is not saying they were sinless, rather he is declaring that being born blind is not the direct consequence of individual sin, or even of conscious sin. For those who thought God punished sinners with sickness in this way, this is a revelation! What an unkind God He would be if He did so generally. Yes, in the main, God does not inflict suffering as a punishment for human afflictions like being born blind. The popular surmise is simply wrong. However, Jesus lifts up the man's blindness as opportunity: **this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.** (v.3) This encounter is opportunity—a chance for God to display his wonder working powers. And, as this raises the question, what if we are walking by miracles waiting to happen on our street corners, in our chance meetings, in brushing past strangers whose apparent discomfiture is God's invitation to heal and help one another. What if?

**As long as it is day, we must do the works of Him who sent Me.** (v. 4) What does Jesus mean with that "we" business? He implicates us plainly in the works of the Father. Works that follow after His works! Works that express the mercy, compassion and grace of God . . . that anoint the commonplace with glory! That cause the blind to see, even. **Night is coming when no one can work.** Surely Jesus alludes here to the end of the age, but there is also a present application. In each occasion there is opportunity and that opportunity can be missed, slighted. How unhappy. Again, we are the compassion of Jesus. The famine of shepherding is over the moment we shepherd the sheep before us, around us. Do something for the harassed and helpless . . . yes, step up and shepherd them. If you do not know how, learn how. Learn from the Good Shepherd. Learn and do.

**While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.** (v.5) If you take relief in those words, thinking, well, at least I'm not Jesus. Amen. You and I are not Jesus. But, but from other Scriptures we know, we are light, and we are salt. So it is with light as it is with shepherding: we, as followers of Jesus, do the very things He did. He shepherds, we shepherd. He is the light of the world, and that light, in us, has not and must not be allowed to go out. The light overcomes the darkness.

**After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (which word means "Sent") So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.** (vv.6-7) Oh, my. Now Jesus has gone and done something drastic. And, dramatic. He obeys the Father and performs a miracle (always cool!) as a

confirmation of His word: **this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.** He didn't ask the man's permission. Why? Because, this is the very reason that the man was even there in the first place. Just like the person that is standing on the street corners of your life. All potential, all promise. Awaiting the healing touch, the word, the love. However, this work was not only kindness . . . it was a call. Jesus gave the man a command to see if he would obey. You want sheep to obey your voice. The man does so. His obedience heals his blindness. His willingness to do what he is told changes his life entirely.

So it is when Jesus calls you to repent of your sins, and you do. I refuse to minimize the physical miracle, but argue anyway that what the man "sees" is this: I am a sheep and I have heard the voice of my shepherd. Now, apparently, this sheep was part of the flock of the King, the Good Shepherd, as well as part of the flock of first century Judaism. In that flock he was a neglected sheep, the blind largely were! He was of the class of the beggars. Widely held to be cursed, a worthless person. *But not to Jesus! Not to any Christian, either. Not to you and me.* He was a shabby, sick and disabled sheep but love transformed him into something quite other.

**His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was. Others said, "No, he only looks like him." But he himself insisted, "I am the man."**

(vv.8-9) This phrase, "ego is sum," (I am the man) resonates with "ecce homo" (Behold, the man)! We might observe kindly that having newly awakened from the sleep of his former being (a blind man now seeing) the man insists on what he is just discovering. He is like the new Christian. He sees some continuity with his past, but, all things being made new, the insistence on who "he is" is charmingly naive. No, Christian, you are not who you were, but, being dead to your former self, you have this new (baptismal) identity in Christ—live in that Name!

**How then were your eyes opened?** The incredulity of these acquaintances is based on the sheer impossibility of a man being born blind now seeing. *It must be a work of God, it is. Only God can do such a thing.* That, of course, is the point! How, dear Christian, were you changed? Only God could make a saint out of you. The blind man says, **The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.** (v.11)

Why is this man not with Jesus? Good question. Do you remember my description of him as a sheep of the flock of Judaism? The man is part of that flock, still under the care of the false shepherds who had written him off with their religious prejudice: people are always afflicted as a result of personal sin. Those who think that way know neither God, nor the nature of sin. Elymas on the island of Cyprus was stricken with blindness as a consequence of sin—Saul was stricken with blindness as a result of his sinful rage against Christians and his persecution of Jesus, but not this man. He was there for God to heal, to do even a mightier work—that is, to cement him in the flock of the Good Shepherd even Jesus Christ. How this sheep finds his way to the Good Shepherd is the next topic in our study of shepherding.