

SHEPHERDING GOD'S PEOPLE INTO GREATER AWARENESS

Nineth Sunday after Pentecost

July 21, 2024

“The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.” These words of comfort from the shepherd Psalmist have brought peace and solace and hope to innumerable weary souls; to each of us in our moments of fear and grief, those times when we didn't know which way to turn.

Then Jeremiah speaks not to the sheep, but to God's shepherds, bringing words of warning from God to them: “‘What sorrow awaits the leaders of my people—the shepherds of my sheep—for they have destroyed and scattered the very ones they were expected to care for,’ says the Lord... ‘Instead of caring for my flock and leading them to safety, you have deserted them and driven them to destruction. Now I will pour out judgment on you for the evil you have done to them.’”

The twenty-third Psalm speaks of the protection and comfort the shepherds provide the sheep. Jeremiah warns those shepherds, who, instead of caring for the sheep and leading them to safety, have instead scattered them and deserted them.

Then we read the Gospel words about Jesus the great shepherd of the flock: “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.”

These scriptures place great responsibility upon the shepherds of God's people, to protect, care for, and provide what they need. 4 ½ years ago when I was installed as shepherd, as Rector of Good Shepherd, I was given a Letter of Institution signed by bishop Dabney Smith. The letter now hangs on the wall in my office. In it are these words: "Having committed yourself to this work, do not forget the trust of those who have chosen you. Care alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor. By your words, and in your life, proclaim the Gospel. Love and serve Christ's people. Nourish them, and strengthen them to glorify God in this life and in the life to come."

As Rector and shepherd, I am always aware of my responsibilities before God and our diocese. My responsibility to make sure that you are safe and cared for, that you are grounded in the truth of the scriptures, in the Creeds, and our catechism. That you are given what you need to grow and awaken more and more into all aspects of the ultimate divine Reality, continually deepening in intimacy with God each other and all creation.

As I, and the rest of the clergy care for you and provide what you need, we take our cues from Jesus of Nazareth who took his cues from his Father God, and from the words of the prophet Isaiah. As Jesus began his ministry he read these words from Isaiah: "'The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" As Jesus' under-shepherd I have been called by God to bring good news, release the captives, bring sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.

First and foremost, I apply Isaiah's words to myself; seeing that I am released from anything that is holding me captive, that I am gaining more

and more awareness and insight and freedom. I go about this external and internal work through scripture reading, meditation, contemplative practices, conversations with others, and reading. Then I strive to apply Isaiah's words to our community here; seeing that truth is revealed to our people, that our Good Shepherd community is guided and nudged towards deeper intimacy and awareness.

Jesus had said, I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full; that they may have abundant life. And abundant life can only and ultimately be known and experienced when God's children are attuned to the Real, the word real with a capital "R", Real as another name for God, the ultimate and eternal Reality. The word attunement means to become aware or responsive to, to bring into harmony with. So, attunement with the capital "R" Real, is to become aware of and responsive to and come into harmony with God the unbounded eternal Reality.

If God is the ultimate unbounded Real, then we need to ask ourselves, what is real? And the answer is not as simple as you might think. You and I may think we know what reality is, but do we really? How much of all that is real do we know; how much are we aware of?

During last Sunday's discussion between services, I mentioned this book called "Flatland" by Edwin Abbott. It was first printed in 1952, and is about geometry; triangles and squares and pentagons and hexagons. Well, actually it is about much more than geometry. The author was a Christian, and he used the subject of geometry to open the eyes of his readers to the possibility that there is much more to reality; much more to all that is in this universal divine Reality than what we perceive and know with our normal conscious awareness.

The book Flatland begins this way: “I call our world Flatland, not because we call it so, but to make its nature clearer to you, my happy readers, who are privileged to live in Space. Imagine a vast sheet of paper on which straight Lines, Triangles, Squares, Pentagons, Hexagons, and other figures, instead of remaining fixed in their places, move freely about, on or in the surface, but without the power of rising above or sinking below it.” The author goes on to explain that dwellers of Flatland only know two dimensions, they know nothing of Space and a third dimension. The book tells how this two-dimensional Flatlanders simple familiar world was one day violently rattled when he encountered a three-dimensional sphere.

Here's how what happened that day might look. (EXPLAIN WITH VISUAL AID)

This is the world of Flatland, flat, width and depth, but no height, nothing like this three-dimensional sphere. One day the sphere came “down” and began to intersect Flatland. Now the Flatlander, having no concept of an up or down, initially “saw” the sphere as only a tiny point, for he could not see up and observe the rest of the sphere above him. Then as the sphere descended further and further “through” Flatland, the Flatlander perceived the sphere as no longer a tiny dot, but now a very short line, and then that line appeared to get longer and longer and longer, and then shorter and shorter again the more the sphere descended through the plane of Flatland.

Now, this poor shocked Flatlander had never seen any being in his world that could grow longer and longer, or shorter and shorter. Next the sphere began to speak to the Flatlander, telling him that he was a sphere, and about up and down, that he also had substance higher and lower than the plane of Flatland. But no matter how much the sphere tried to explain three dimensions to the Flatlander, he just could not grasp it. It wasn't until the

Sphere grabbed ahold of the Flatlander and took him above the plane of Flatland and into the third dimension above, that the Flatlander could now see a whole new reality, and he saw now, how limiting his two-dimensional world of Flatland had been.

You and I, as dwellers of Space-land; of third dimension, have a similar problem as this Flatlander. We too are limited in our ability to see what is beyond that which we normally perceive with our five senses. We have no way of grasping or comprehending what might possibly be a fourth or fifth or even a sixth dimension, or some other form of Reality that is beyond our current level of conscious awareness.

Now, it might seem logical for you to ask, why would I want or need to understand any reality beyond the one I currently know? I get along fine with what I currently know. Here's one reason why you might want to consider expanding your reality. God and other possible divine beings and our loved ones who have died abide in this greater Reality beyond what we know with our current conscious awareness. And after we die, we will experience this greater Reality. And Jesus was often trying to get the Jewish people to be open to what was beyond what they knew. He said the Kingdom of Heaven is among you.

God the ultimate Real, dwells beyond my normal conscious awareness. But forty-seven years ago my faith journey began when I experienced something akin to the Flatlander encountering the sphere. I encountered a greater Reality. And through the years there have been other less dramatic times when I have had hints and inklings of this transcendent divine Reality through a greater awareness within my heart and soul and spirit. And yet it can be challenging for me to try and explain or reveal these other realities to other people.

It was even more challenging for Jesus to point these things out to the people in his time. He lived in a much narrower and limited world than ours, their conscious awareness was much more limiting. They knew nothing about germs and viruses and atoms and molecules and galaxies. Whereas in our day, every elementary school student knows all these things.

Jesus was the only person who ever lived who was more attuned to God the ultimate Reality than any other person who has ever walked this earth. And Jesus saw it as his calling as Son of Man and Son of God and Rabbi and prophet, to expand the people's attunement to divine ultimate Reality. He tried to do this through the many parables he told; the stories about what the reign and realm of God was like. He saw the limitations of the Jewish people and Jewish religion and told the people that new wine must be put into new wine skins. He talked about opening people's eyes and waking them up. Some people were able to grasp his teaching, opening their eyes, expanding their vision. But for others, well, Jesus' words about the ultimate divine reality just seemed ludicrous and crazy and just a road way too far to travel. They were incapable of expanding their conscious awareness at that time. And so, they rejected his message.

Thankfully, there have been many of God's children down through the ages; many ordinary people and monks and priests and nuns and scholars, who have had their eyes further opened and have gained greater awareness. People like Maggie Buonarosa from Good Shepherd, and John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart and Evelyn Underhill and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Ken Wilber, and Richard Rohr and many, many, many others.

As each of these individuals have perceived further conscious awareness, they have attempted to bring this greater conscious awareness to others around them. Some who heard their words believed and had their eyes

opened. While others have rejected their message as crazy talk. As a result, some of these aware individuals within the established church have been rejected and labeled as heretics in their time. Galileo was one. Pierre de Chardin was another.

It is my job, and Fr. John's job as God's under-shepherds, to work in union with God and you, to ground you in the faith, and to compassionately strive to expand your conscious awareness still further towards fuller and fuller attunement with ultimate and eternal Reality, the kingdom of God that is among you. And changing and seeing more and being open to this greater reality can be difficult for any of us. For, just as it was very hard for me to be awakened to further reality, it is often hard for others to see with new eyes. Some will be open to seeing a bigger reality and expanding their conscious awareness, while others, for whatever reason, will not.

Jesus said, I have come as a shepherd to open the eyes of the blind and set the captives free. May we be open to greater awareness of God's divine and transcendent reality.