

Nicolas
Sama
Blind Man
Good Shepherd

JESUS, THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Acts 2:42-47; psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Two events have caught my attention over the last several months and deeply influenced the preparation of my sermon. One event is the scandal rocking the church where pastors have robbed young people of their innocence and destroyed their spiritual life. Pastors, whose voices their victims have recognized calling them by name, have molested young people. Pope John Paul has summoned to the Vatican all the American Cardinals in the Roman Catholic church to address the issue of sexual abuse among the clergy. But the problem of sexual harassment and abuse is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church. No denomination, religion, or profession is exempt.

The other event that caught my attention as I was preparing my sermon is the political crisis in the Middle East where both Israeli Prime Minister Sharon and Palestinian leader Arafat have been making decisions that have taken hundreds, if not thousands, of innocent lives. Political leadership is in crisis all over the world – in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Venezuela. As I prepared my sermon this week I discovered that the Word of Christ still speaks today to our need for good political and spiritual leadership.

In the figure of speech of a shepherd, Jesus was talking about religious and political leaders. He spoke of illegitimate leaders as thieves and robbers who come, not to give life, but to steal, kill and destroy. In the Bible *shepherd* is often a figure of speech for political and religious leaders. Even today the word *pastor* is related to a Latin word that means *shepherd*. A political leader is called to unify the nation and provide security and justice for citizens. A pastor is called by Jesus Christ to *shepherd* or lead Christ's sheep. Unfortunately, however, in our day and age, leadership, political and religious, has become a term of abuse and those who exercise political or religious leadership are almost universally presumed to be corrupt. John Stossel on Dateline – the fleecing of America

In a few weeks we'll go to the polls to vote in the primaries. The primaries are every bit as important as the national election because we have the opportunity to nominate people who will represent our political party in the fall. I believe that voting, in itself, is an act of leadership. As leaders in our community, I encourage you to vote and encourage others to vote. If you are unable to get to the polls you can vote by absentee ballot. We need good political leaders; leaders who will protect the sheep from scam artists and those who hurt and destroy; leaders who will lead and protect all the sheep and not just the sheep who share their economic status, ethnic identity, educational attainments or social standing in the community.

Our congregation has been blessed over the years with good political leaders.^{B.M. Don / Rep} To name just a few: the late John Ware III was a state senator and a U.S. congressman. Dorothea Murray, Jim McLeod, and Dick Winchester have run for state representative. Jan Townsend, Nancy Andress, and Dick Winchester have served on the Oxford Area School District Board of Education. Jim Sumner, Geoff Henry, Don Drennan and John Ware IV have served on the Borough Council.

Carlton Groff, out in Southern Lancaster County, has served as township supervisor. All of these names are in the public record. I'm sure I've missed some but I want you to know that our church has provided the community with excellent political leadership. *a stone it will certainly*

We desperately need good political leaders; people to get involved in the political process. Who is capable of being the governor of the commonwealth of PA? Who has the courage, the endurance and the vision? Who has the sense of justice, the feeling for ordinary citizens and their needs, and the care for the poorest and weakest? By asking such question we come nearer to understanding what the figure of the shepherd meant to a Jew of the first century. *To protect the sheep rather than to flee - to give life rather than to steal a mill*

It's not easy to be a political leader. One United States Senator recently shared his difficulty in making wise political decisions. Without saying how he voted on various issues he asks, "How do you make a decision between a better environment and the jobs it will cost? The dignity of

employment and our stewardship over creation *both* demand moral attention. Is a cleaner river worth regulations that eliminate 30 jobs, 300 jobs, 3,000 jobs? How do you weigh cleaner air against the broken spirit of the unemployed? How do you choose between fighting poverty and fighting dependency? How do you pursue generous compassion when it risks the slow destruction of the spirit we see in generation after generation of a welfare underclass? How do you choose between a reverence for life and the use of fetal tissue from abortions to treat the victims of Parkinson's disease?" It's not easy to be a good political shepherd. These are the kind of tough calls that our political leaders are facing with increasing frequency.

Everybody knows that lobbyists try to influence what politicians do and that's a legitimate part of the governing process. We've read about politicians who've been accused of taking bribes and receiving money for votes. It's tough to be a political leader. Their lives are under intense scrutiny. But we get the leadership we deserve if we don't vote and get involved in the political process. We need to listen carefully to the voices of those who aspire to be our political shepherds. Whether or not they are professed Christians, do we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in what they say?

A true leader knows his constituents. Jesus said, "he calls his own sheep by name." A true leader knows his or her constituency and believes that all people matter. A true leader believes truth and justice should shape attitudes toward those who don't matter much in the eyes of society: minorities such as AIDS victims, those crushed by poverty, victims of discrimination, and all who are most vulnerable whether or not they're old enough to vote. True shepherds are concerned about "lost sheep" (politically and religiously). They go out of their way to rescue them. True shepherds are willing to lay down their lives, or lose an election, for their sheep.

True shepherds, political or religious, *lead* rather than *drive*. The Middle Eastern shepherd walked ahead of the sheep, expecting them to follow rather than being driven from behind. Jesus

said that the true shepherd goes ahead of the sheep. True shepherds don't rely on polls to tell them where to go. True shepherds have a vision of where they want to lead the people; a vision which they attempt to inspire their constituents to see. While being sensitive to the real needs of constituents, they lead their constituents beside still waters and paths of righteousness.

I've concentrated so far on political leadership but I want to turn, now, briefly, to religious shepherds. Clergy are under fire today with good reason due to child molesting. Several years ago our elders exercised good leadership by adopting a Child Protection Policy to protect our children against those who would enter the sheepfold to steal and kill and destroy. Jim Sumner, our Director of Christian Education, took the lead in developing, writing, and presenting the policy to the session for adoption. The purpose of the policy is to assure that our church provides a place where children and adolescents can "come to Jesus" without fear of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. I'm happy to say that the Oxford Presbyterian Church has *never* had a reported incident of abuse in our congregation = not even an accusation. -I also want to assure you that every minister in our Presbytery is required to take a seminar dealing with sexual abuse and undergo a criminal record check with the state. I urge you to pray for me as well as our elders and deacons that we may follow the pattern of Christ as we lead you.

Pray that all of us, religious and political leaders, may so follow Christ, whether or not we're Christians, so that we will not lead anyone astray and so that we all might experience the abundant life Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gave his life for us to experience.

God of all power, you called from death our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep. Send us as shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to feed one another with knowledge and understanding; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.