

A Sermon by the Rev. William J. Neat

Ascension, Frankfort

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(Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30)

Back a few years ago, an instructor in intercultural communications at a university began an exercise with his students. The instructor told the students to write the word “Jesus” on a piece of paper. After they had written “Jesus,” he told the students to put the paper on the floor and step on the word Jesus.

According to news reports, some degree of chaos ensued. Many of the students were uncomfortable with the exercise. One student became enraged, threatened the professor, was suspended from school, and went to the media. The story then morphed – as these stories tend to do – into an escalating series of diatribes against the instructor in specific, and academia in general.

Within a very short time, the university had not only publicly apologized for “the incident,” but placed the instructor on administrative leave. He was put on leave for his own safety because so many self-professed defenders of Christianity had threatened to, among other things, hang him from a tree, stomp him into the ground, or just plain kill him. However, about three months later he was reinstated to his teaching post.

The great irony in this story is that the instructor is an avowed Christian.

The exercise was designed to **help students gain awareness of the power of symbols, about the important role symbolic communication plays in human interactions.**

According to the lesson plan, “Most students who participate in the exercise don’t step on Jesus’ name and they go on to explain why it’s important for them not to do so.”

Of course, that’s the whole point of the exercise – to cause participants to have self-awareness and be able to articulate what they’re experiencing. In other words, they were asked to actually do college level work at a university.

Symbols have power. Instinctively, we know that.

Whether those symbols are the Stars and Stripes, the Stars and Bars, Miters and Croziers, we know those symbols have the power to rally or repel people.

We treasure our flags, our religious symbols, and various other symbols because of all of the accumulated history and emotional weight of what those symbols represent.

When we use symbols or when we assign a title, we do so with an inherent awareness that we are also using all of that accumulated meaning. Symbols have been part of human communication pretty much as long as there has been human communication.

As our Gospels show us, Jesus understood the power of symbols. Jesus often used symbolic actions and speech to convey large amounts of information in a few brief words or acts.

We read in our Gospel today about one of those symbols – the symbol of a shepherd.

Our reading today is actually only one small part of the longer, “I am the good shepherd,” saying by Jesus in the Gospel of John. In the verses just before today’s reading, Jesus has been challenged by the religious authorities for, among other things, restoring sight to a blind man, and for claiming his identity as the good shepherd.

Few symbols in scripture have as much power as that of shepherd. Despite the fact that real shepherds were often held in disrepute by the people of Israel, the image of God as shepherd was, is, the divine ideal.

We see that reflected in Psalm 23, one of the most familiar passages of scripture.

But when Jesus claimed to be shepherd, many in his audience would probably have heard even more than just a quote from the psalm. More than likely, they would have heard the echoes of King David – the shepherd king.

They may have heard the prophetic words from Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah, contrasting the bad shepherds (Israel’s kings and religious leaders) who starve the sheep, and the good shepherd – the Lord God – who comforts, heals, and restores the sheep.

So by using the symbol of the good shepherd to define himself, Jesus conveyed the promises of peace, of abundance, of protection.

Symbols have power.

But here’s an interesting thing about symbols – they only carry power with them if we understand the historical, or theological, or emotional, or whatever freight that goes along with them.

The power comes only if we understand the value of what those symbols mean – if we can feel the weight of everything that symbol represents.

As symbols have power, titles have power, also.

Shepherd is a both symbol and a title that Jesus claimed.

Another term for shepherd is pastor. Pastor derives from the Latin word for shepherd. Pastor is loaded with symbolism and title, responsibility and authority.

Pastors are the priests raised up to be in charge of our congregations. Bishops are the chief priests and pastors of their respective dioceses. Being pastoral pertains to how pastors exercise their responsibility and authority for those in their charge.

Pastors symbolize all that's tied up in the history, tradition, scripture, and theology of the Church. Where we stand when we worship. What we wear, both during worship and on the street, all have symbolic meaning.

The accouterments of pastoral authority and responsibility such as deacons' and priests' stoles, along with bishops' miters and croziers, are rich in the ancient tradition of our Hebraic-Christian heritage.

As symbols, these accouterments and vestments along with the people who wear and use them, stir up memories and expectations in others – good and bad, real and unrealistic.

These memories and expectations are relational. The relationship between the people and the pastor conjures up all sorts of memories both good and less than good; both real and imagined.

In our tradition we do not use the term *pastor* all that much, instead we use *rector* which, for the most part, means the same thing.

Rectors come and rectors go. In our tradition, when the rector goes he or she severs all pastoral relationships with the congregation. (Notice that I did not say severs all friendly relationships.)

The rector's authority and responsibilities are handed over to the successor or other ecclesiastical authorities. By custom and canon they (former rectors) are forbidden to visit the sick of the parish, perform weddings and funerals, and so forth.

In most dioceses, both by custom and by canon, the former rector and family do not worship in their old congregation for a set period time. In our diocese that is for at least one year from the time the successor is in place.

The reason for this custom and canon is because doing otherwise undermines the authority of the succeeding incumbent's leadership.

After that set period of time, the old rector may return to the congregation if the incumbent rector and the bishop agree that it is for the mutual benefit of the congregation and the clergy.

There are instances – where the congregational health is good, the clergy are respectful of roles of authority and responsibility, and are fully collegial – that it makes good sense to do so.

As an exception to rule and practice, because of a pastoral situation, an incumbent may seek the old rector's public assistance and contact them, which would be a rare circumstance.

All rectors and former rectors know this, but not all choose to follow long-established custom and practices. And that is not helpful to anyone.

Members of a congregation have a responsibility to respect these customs and practices, too. Do not ask a former rector to marry your children, bury your loved one, or come by for a pastoral home or hospital visit.

It places an unwarranted heavy burden on a former rector and entraps them into seemingly being cold-hearted when they say no; or, agreeing and thereby undermining the incumbent.

Not holding on to the former rector is also a kindness to that former rector. It helps that person transition to their new life. And, sometimes, titles/roles are laid down because those who have carried them need to rest. Trying to force the person to take back a title/role that has been lovingly surrendered is an excessive burden that no one should ask.

As we are still very much in Eastertide, let us recall the Easter morning encounter between Mary Magdalene and the Risen Jesus when Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." (John 20:17)

Mary needed to let go of the past and begin to experience the future in her spiritual journey. And, Jesus needed to let go of the past in order to fulfill his call to be with the Father and the cosmos in his resurrected life.

Bishops and priests, as shepherds, need to come and need to go.

However, the symbol of the shepherd remains because they always point to the one true and eternal great Shepherd, Jesus our Lord and Saviour. The shepherd, with all the connotations, points toward the resurrected Jesus and the hope of resurrection.

Let us always remember that because we are, after all, a resurrection people.

Amen.