

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: The Same Sermon”
Rev. Amy Morgan
February 5, 2017

Ezekiel 34:1-16, Luke 5:27-32

Do any of you have a favorite children’s book? One that you’ve read over and over again, to your children or grandchildren? Or maybe you have one that you read as a child so many times you’ve memorized it.

There was a time when the youth group read Moo, Baa, Lalala so many times to my son over the course of a weekend that I think we all have it permanently imprinted on our brains.

Some of these books have a message that, for whatever reason, spoke to us – as children or adults. Something that resonated with how we experience the world. And we needed to hear it again and again. Maybe it even took on different or deeper meaning at various points in our lives.

Well, preaching is kind of like that.

I’ve been preaching here at First Presbyterian for ten years now, and after looking back on all those sermons this week, I discovered that I’ve been basically preaching the same thing over and over. Month after month, year after year, sermon after sermon, I’ve been preaching about the sovereignty of God, the brokenness of humanity, and the gracious invitation to join in God’s work of reconciling the world through Jesus Christ. That’s it. Same sermon. Ten years.

Through three presidential administrations, through economic recession and recovery, through tragedies on a global, national, and personal scale, through relationships and trust built up over years or in short, intense experiences, I have preached the same sermon to you all.

You might be tired of it by now.

But it’s the sermon that I need to hear. Again and again. And it takes on new and deeper meaning at various points in my life. So I’m going to preach this sermon once more, at least.

Listening to today’s scripture passages, we might be tempted to think this is “Law and Order: Ripped From the Headlines” kind of stuff. I’m sorry, but when I read about those terrible shepherds, growing fat by devouring the lost, weak sheep, I went straight to my daily newsfeed and found all kinds of sermon material there. Scores of public figures emerged for me when I read about those self-righteous scribes and Pharisees judging Jesus for including everybody and healing those most in need.

But before I could start railing against those shepherds and Pharisees in our society, I had to hear

God's word to me. You see, you may think that preachers are preaching to their congregations. But any preacher worth their salt will tell you they are preaching to themselves first. We are telling the story we need to hear over and over again. And we hope it does you some good, too.

So those shepherds, those scribes and Pharisees – who are they? Well, Ezekiel is addressing the leaders of Israel, which, being a theocratic society, necessarily meant the *religious* leaders of Israel. And you pair that with this little Jesus story where the religious leaders think Jesus shouldn't be hanging out with the riff-raff, and there's nowhere to point the finger except right here.

As a shepherd of God's people, I'm supposed to make sure you are healthy and well-fed and safe. And I wish I could look back over the last ten years, or look out at you all right now, and say I've done a bang-up job. But I know that many of you are soul-sick; many of you are starving for meaning and purpose and love and hope; many of you are lost and fearful and under attack. I know this. I talk to you. I hear you. I know you.

This may sound like I'm just beating up on myself, because pastors are really good at that. But I am perfectly comfortable identifying with the neglectful shepherds in Ezekiel. I am happy to own up to what I've done and what I've left undone over the last ten years. Because God makes this awesome promise. God promises to come and care for the sheep – to seek them out and rescue them and feed them. And God promises to destroy the fat and the strong and to feed them with justice.

This is a hopeful promise for me. God will do what I cannot, and God will destroy what is self-serving and self-righteous about me and feed me with justice. That is good news. God is sovereign. We are broken. But we are graciously invited to join in God's work of reconciling the world through Jesus Christ.

So I've claimed my place in this story, I'm a shepherd who needs God to step in and take over. But we're Presbyterian, friends. And what that means is that every single person who has been claimed by God in baptism has also been called by God to be a shepherd to all the sheep of the world.

I may be a shepherd of this flock here at First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, but you all – we all – are shepherds of our households, our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our communities, our cities, our state, our nation, and our world.

And if you think it's tough being a pastor, being a shepherd to the faithful who come here week after week to hear the Word of God and pray and work and be in community – ooh – try being a shepherd beyond these walls. That's your job. Mine, too. And that ain't easy.

And I don't know that we've done a great job. Do our families, our neighbors, our colleagues suffer from soul-sickness? Are they starved for good news?

In my experience, our children somehow think it is more important to us that they get a scholarship to

a top-ranked school than whether or not they are committed to love and justice and peace. They're no fools. We aren't sending mixed messages when we pressure them to bring up their math grade but don't apply the same force around sitting with kids who are outcast at lunch. Our messages to them are loud and clear. They know what we shepherds want from them. Does that make us bad shepherds? Does it make us good parents?

Our neighborhoods are filled with stray sheep, prey for the wolves of loneliness and fear. If I don't know my neighbor, I don't feel responsible for them. They can wander off, and I wouldn't even notice. They can be devoured by depression, abuse, illness, or any number of invisible struggles, and all that matters to me is that their house sells for more money and improves my property value.

God forbid we should talk about religion in our workplaces, but I'm going to bet we've all discussed politics in the last few years. Wouldn't religion be the more agreeable of those two taboo topics these days? But the life of the shepherd is easier if we don't have to share the thing that nourishes us. We save it for ourselves. If we tell others about it, it costs us something. There is a price we're not willing to pay to stand up for our faith and its values in the "secular" world. Does that make us bad shepherds? Does it make us good citizens?

And I wish I could tell you which politician or policy at any level of government, from the city of Birmingham to the UN, was going to represent the values of the kingdom of heaven. I've got my hunches and opinions, of course. But even I am old enough to know that history has a way of playing out and judging our actions that not even the wisest of us can foresee. And I know that we would rather point to a politician or a political party and accuse them of being bad shepherds than shoulder that identity ourselves.

If our cities, our state, our nation, and our world do not experience the good news that God is sovereign, that humanity is broken, and that we are graciously invited to join in God's work of reconciling the world in Jesus Christ – we are the bad shepherds. That is OUR work. Our work is to trust God to be God, and not claim that power for ourselves. Our work is to acknowledge the brokenness we see within ourselves and to see the suffering of others. Our work is to see where God is active in the world and jump in and get our hands dirty.

Instead, we look at one another, at one another in this very room, and say, "how can you call yourself a Christian and..." There's no way Jesus should be hanging out with him. Or her. Or them. They are tax collectors. And sinners. Isn't it good news that Jesus is eating with them? Isn't it good news that Jesus is always eating with the people we judge to be unrighteous and unworthy?

We read this story in Luke and think that Jesus is saying that the tax collectors and sinners at the table are the ones who are sick and in need of physician, the sinners in need of repentance. But what if his comment is really an invitation to the scribes and the Pharisees to sit down and join the meal, to admit their own sin and seek out healing for their soul-sickness? What if the righteous ones are those who invited him to dinner and came out to eat with him?

We have failed as shepherds, all of us. The sheep have scattered. The wolves are gobbling them up. But we have an invitation. To sit down with Jesus and be fed with justice. To be healed of our soul-sickness by the Great Physician. To let God destroy our self-righteousness. To trust the Good Shepherd to take care of the sheep in ways that we have not. It's good news. God is sovereign. Humanity is broken. We are graciously invited to join in God's work of reconciling the world through Jesus Christ.

Our opinions will vary about what that looks like. Do you acknowledge God as Lord of your Sunday morning or Lord of your investment accounts? Do you see the brokenness of humanity in the global refugee crisis or in the hopelessness and despair that opens the door to radicalization of a religion? Do you see God's work in the world, and commit to joining it, in small acts of kindness, in marches and rallies, or in waiting and hoping?

You may be surprised to hear this, but I say yes to all of it. That is why I am so privileged to serve as a pastor, a shepherd, at Everybody's Church. There have been many times in the last ten years when I have not been certain if we could hold the tension, hold the space, that allows me to preach the same sermon and let it be heard in different ways. No time more so than now, I think.

So I'm asking you all, as a gift to me, if you have any honor or respect for the work I've done here over the last ten years, to hear this sermon one more time today. To hear it with your own ears, your own worldview, your own politics and opinions. To know that it is a message for you, and for the person next to you, and the person on the other side of the aisle. That it is a message for your family, and your neighborhood, and our cities, our state, our nation, and our world.

Turn to your neighbor, right now, and tell them, "God is sovereign." Turn to another neighbor and tell them, "Humanity is broken." Church, we are graciously invited to join in God's work of reconciling the world in Jesus Christ. That means that, with the help of God, we can be better shepherds. We can look out for one another. We can feed one another. Turn back to your neighbor and tell them, "With God's help, I will be your shepherd."

Starting here and starting now, we can be better shepherds. To one another. And to our families. And our towns, and state and nation and world. In every action, every commitment, every vote, every conversation, we can be better shepherds.

We can start by coming together and eating at this table, where Jesus Christ is the host. Here, the hungry sheep will find good pasture, and the fat shepherds will be fed with justice. Here, the tax collectors and sinners find a welcome, and the scribes and Pharisees hear the invitation to sit down and repent.

Here, we will be told the same story Christians have been telling for thousands of years. May we find in it a new and deeper meaning today. May it draw us together as one flock under the care of the Good Shepherd. May it heal our brokenness. And may we be fed with justice. Amen.