

I AM: Building a Christ-Centered Church *Good Shepherd*

John 10:1-11

January 28, 2024

A couple of weeks ago, a friend in our congregation and a leader in our community shared with me the link to a piece from Harvard Business Review. Though the essay was written nearly fifteen years ago, in his message, my friend suggested that it might be a timely read at the beginning of 2024. The title of the piece: *Leadership in a [Permanent] Crisis*. I'll confess that I didn't have the energy or the fortitude to read it. Instead, I printed the fifteen pages, and I set them aside. Then last Sunday evening, stuck on an airplane idling on the runway, I concluded the message was: now was the time to read the piece. The authors are three professors who study *adaptive leadership*. They suggested that the current crisis—the Great Recession of 2008—was only the beginning of a sustained or permanent string of serious and unfamiliar challenges. I think this insight qualifies them as fortune tellers or prophets.

To lead well in permanent crisis, the authors argue, requires leaders to balance the urgency of much needed change with the amount of stress the system can handle. One author in another piece writes, "The art of leadership is disappointing people at a rate they can tolerate." This seems right to me, but the specific tasks they outline are much easier to preach than they are to practice. For example? "*Embrace Disequilibrium*." Now, that's a stretch.

Next Sunday morning, as part of our church's annual meeting, you will elect new classes of elders and deacons to lead our church in the years ahead. As they prepare for these important new roles, we will honor the gifts of experience and hard-won expertise that they possess. As we train them for those roles, we will study the theology of our ancestors and the

structure of our polity shaped by generations of past leaders. And then, we will ask them to embrace the disequilibrium that comes with permanent crisis. We will seek change that is both faithful and adaptive. We will pray for vision and ask God for the gift of courage as we lead in the years to come.

Now, the insights of civic, business, and academic sectors can help us here, but there are also some peculiarities to leadership in the Church. For starters, the benchmarks and goals are different. At its most faithful, the Church does not seek to accumulate power but to distribute compassion. At its best, the Church does not fixate on the bottom line but on the ones left behind or forgotten. Perhaps most importantly, at its core, our message is not one of self-promotion but of selfless service. We point not to ourselves but to Christ. As the Apostle Paul eloquently wrote, we do not proclaim ourselves; we preach Christ and him crucified. Our standard for leadership and discipleship is Jesus Christ. Jesus, who resisted leadership by tyranny, built on coercive power. Jesus, neither tyrant nor emperor. Neither general nor dictator. Neither CEO nor president. *But Good Shepherd*.

By the time we reach the tenth chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is a leader. He has attracted a large following. He's been all over the region of Galilee. He's teaching growing crowds. He's feeding the hungry multitudes. He's welcoming the outcast. He is healing. He is blessing. He is proclaiming in word and in action the Kingdom of God and its arrival in our midst. By this time, Jesus has also experienced the sting of cynicism and the rise of opposition. He has his critics. In fact, just before this morning's chapter, a group

of well-respected religious leaders criticize Jesus for healing a man without first condemning him for the sins they assume caused his condition. “Jesus, how can you freely offer grace and healing to one who stands condemned? What kind of leader are you?”

Jesus seizes the moment to compare leadership models. In her book on leadership, the former President of Duke University, Nan Keohane, writes about the life of Nelson Mandela. She describes how, “as a young boy, (Mandela) observed the regent chief of his people presiding at meetings of members of his tribe. Mandela writes, ‘I always remember the regent’s axiom. A leader, he said, is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock. He lets the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.’”⁴ Sounds a lot like adaptive leadership to me.

From beginning to end, scripture’s image of faithful leadership is the shepherd. In the Psalms, in the Prophets, in the Gospels, God—Jesus—is our shepherd, gently guiding an unruly collection of directionally challenged beasts toward a destination they cannot see. And from beginning to end, it is a picture not of force but of tenderness.

By what means does the shepherd lead us? Jesus says the shepherd leads by the sound of a trusted voice. It is this calming, reassuring, nurturing, protecting voice to which the sheep respond. Jesus will repeat the observation several times later in the chapter. *My sheep know my voice.*

And so, the takeaway seems straightforward. As disciples of Jesus, who is our Good Shepherd, we simply must listen to his voice and follow him in the way we live our lives. Listen. Respond. Couldn’t be easier, right?

Well...kind of like wearing a *What Would Jesus Do* bracelet, the challenge comes not in abstract phrase but in concrete decision. Jesus is clear. The voice of the shepherd is not the only one, not the only voice the sheep hear. There are thieves. There are bandits.

There are strange voices who aim to divide and destroy. So, the better question for disciples is, “How do we distinguish? How can we know the voice we follow belongs to Jesus when a constant cacophony confronts us?”

You know the cacophony. Some of those voices are whispering in your head. Some are shouting through screens. Some justify our worst impulses (“*It’s ok*”). Others make promises they never intend to keep. Some stir up antipathy toward others. Still others drown out the quiet nudge of conscience. If there is any truism of our time, it is that we are surrounded by voices. The task of source discernment (that is, where is the voice coming from?) is always before us. It is true when we are faced with life-defining decisions. It is true when we are collectively confronted with choices that will shape the future of our congregation, our city, our state, our nation. And the challenge is just as pressing in our daily lives as we face one decision after another, while those voices swirl in our heads, pushing us in every direction. Disequilibrium. We can feel it. And so, we too are like sheep with no shepherd.

We must confess that the church has been complicit in the chaos. I hear church leaders lament the decreased participation in our congregations and the declining faithfulness of members. I hear disappointment that many have lost their way and abandoned the Church. And I share their desire that more folks would discover that purpose can be found in following the way of Jesus.

But I also believe that we must repent of the ways we in the Church have abandoned faithful souls. When we have resisted needed adaptation and dug in our heels. When we have adopted the tactics of coercion or self-righteousness, the ones that Jesus explicitly rejects. We must confess. We must ask ourselves hard questions. Have we silenced the voice of Jesus? Have we drowned out the whispers of the Spirit? Have we replaced His voice with our own agendas, anxieties, or attacks?

To lead in the church is to help each other listen and recognize the voice of Jesus. How can we do that? The answer comes from the Good Shepherd himself. “The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Friends, the best evidence that the voice we are following belongs to Jesus Christ is the abundant life to which it leads us. Despite all the guarantees of the voices that clamor for our devotion—guarantees of more power, more money, more influence, more security, more success, more of just about everything—these voices will never be able to offer what you most deeply need. Life that is abundant, life that is worth living, life filled with purpose, life full of passion. Abundance of life is the promise the Good Shepherd offers. It’s what we have to give to each other and to the world in his name.

And so, my friends, we must resist the siren song of those who seek power for a few at the expense of the many. We must resist divisive voices who propose only to partition us, whose words demean and demonize the very children of God who belong to the Good Shepherd just like you do.

After all, where has following these voices gotten us? We’ve been warned. The thief comes to destroy. So, if the movement that claims to follow Christ takes this bleak path, we will betray our mission. We will sacrifice our future on the altar of fear or false hope. Friends, this much I know. We will become reflections of the voices we follow. That is true whether we intend to or not. When we follow the voice of division, distrust, and deceit, those same forces will emerge and eventually reign in our lives, in our communities, in our country.

In a time of permanent crisis, the witness of the church must be clear. God intends abundant life for all. Jesus laid down *his* life so that we could be freed from fear, freed to live in faith. And so, this is no time to lose our way, no time to abandon our call, no time to divide the flock, chasing tempting illusions.

Rather, let us embrace disequilibrium. Or at least accept it. It’s inevitable. And then let us fix our eyes, and our ears, on Jesus. What he offers is what every human creature yearns to find, the pastures in which we long to graze. Life abundant.

The Lord is my shepherd. We know his voice. For God’s sake, let us follow it without fear.

ⁱ Keohane, Nannerl O. *Thinking about Leadership*, Princeton University Press, 2010. p. 30.