

The Good Shepherd

April 21, 2024

Let the light of Christ illuminate God's path for us in the name of the Creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen

When I was in seminary, we took a Christian Ethics class that required a group project. Our group project was investigating hostile architecture.

Hostile architecture is an urban design strategy that uses elements of the built environment to intentionally guide or restrict behavior. Things like metal spikes on flat surfaces near buildings to make it impractical or uncomfortable to sit or sleep on those surfaces. Armrests or uniquely designed bus or park benches with the same intentions. This may also include sprinklers that spray intermittently as opposed to being on a timer.

While these design features may initially seem innocuous or be sold as positive features, deterring insects, or as a form of pest control, prohibiting skateboarders doing tricks on cement stairs, loitering, etc. Our observations found the impact to be most felt in the unhoused community.

These architectural designs pushed folks outside the urban center in search of practical places to sleep and rest.

As a result, folks who needed services in the city center were further away, making it more difficult to get to food banks, social service offices, or to work without making multiple transfers on a bus. While there may have been positive uses for some of these design features, the impact on those most vulnerable in the community were quite significant.

Our texts for today point us to the narrative of the Shepherd. The one who "leads us beside still waters...revives our souls whose mercy will follow us for all the days of our lives." It is this idea of a shepherd that we encounter in our Gospel

text as Jesus proclaims he is the Good Shepherd. One that knows and takes ownership over their flock. Who brings in those who were not a part of the fold. Here, Jesus also talks about the hired hand who does not own the sheep and runs at the first sign of danger because the hired hand does not care for the sheep in the same way as the Good Shepherd.

A challenge we all face when we are faced with the needs of others that are different than our own.

The good shepherd here takes ownership of their sheep. Jesus says that the sheep known and unknown to him are still a part of the fold.

Jesus goes on to describe the need to lay down his life for the sheep.

Sometimes when we discuss this text, I feel like we forget how intelligent sheep are. They are animals with great memories. They can even remember how to navigate complex mazes.

As with all pieces of scripture we tend to find ways to see ourselves and others in it. Just like all of God's creation are deserving of our care and curiosity.

When we envision ourselves or our neighbors in this text as the sheep we should be understood as creatures deserving of dignity and communities of belonging.

These texts help remind us of the importance of belonging. Of having communities of care that feel that level of ownership alongside us. That feel with us, not for us, and listen to our communal desire for dignity and justice.

Jesus knows us, protected, and shepherded along the way. How we show up for each other and those who are outside the fold is exceptionally important.

We must consider the voices of those on the margins, those who aren't currently represented in our community and those whom we don't have regular interactions with.

After completing my project in my Christian Ethics class, I couldn't unsee the hostile architecture for what it was. I also couldn't stop seeing it everywhere I went. Truly, what else would be the purpose of an armrest on a bus bench?

One of the things we did as part of our project was to write letters to local government officials and local newspapers, bringing the issue to their attention and asking them to take action. While I am unsure, this did much I know the project changed how we saw the world along with our classmates.

This project also helped us to recognize that individual interventions may not be as effective as more complex communal ones. Showing that systemic change along with individual witness could be an important path forward.

Our texts for today are calling us to consider what it means to create belonging in our communities. To be reminded that Jesus welcomes all of us into the fold.

We are called to do the same. To work to remove the barriers that exclude others in our communities. To ask the questions, listen deeply and believe the experiences of those who have been outside the fold.

So, how do we continue the work of the shepherd while making sure that we avoid the trap of becoming the hired hand? Where we react with fear instead of curiosity. Where we don't truly believe all are a part of God's beloved creation and act accordingly.

We are faced with these moments all the time. When we can choose to welcome all people into the fold as they are or as we think they should be. To truly follow the path of Jesus is to welcome all as they are and to respond with curiosity and not with fear. To ask and listen to the needs of our neighbor so that we may be partners in the response to their needs. Helping to create belonging and building stronger relationships along the way.

Jesus is often reminding us of God's love and our call to share it with one another.

We do this because Jesus guides our path and is always with us on our journey.

So, as we move into our week, my prayer for us all is that our eyes and hearts are open to the needs of others in our community and that the spirit helps us to respond in kind.

Amen