The Rev. Beverly Dempsey
Transitional Pastor
May 15, 2011

"The Stuff of Coyotes and Shepherds"

Ps 23; John 10: 1-10

Soon after moving to the Metro-NY area, I was surprised to learn that not everyone subscribes to the NY Times. There went my vision of blue bags on every driveway at dawn. When I came to *Ramsey* last year, I learned that the Times is even more controversial than I'd come to realize. Is it *really* all the news that's fit to print? Depending on whom your speaking with, the Times is either comprehensive and objective or filtered and biased. There's rarely an opinion in between. I'm still convinced that there's a lesson to be read within each line of the paper - or maybe in between them all.

Last Monday, NT Times article about Coyotes. Now, we're not talking about your average, four-legged friend. Coyotes are those people on either side of the Mexico/US border who help Latin and South American men, women and children without proper documentation to enter into the US. At one point, Coyotes walked along *with* the illegal immigrants and guided them through the AZ desert. Now, it's as often as not that Coyotes use high-tech to make the job easier and less risky. (Easier and less risky for the coyotes, but not necessarily for the illegal immigrants.) These are the "cyber-coyotes." They sit on a hill on the Mexican side of the border with binoculars and monitor a group's progress. Then they text members of the group so that they know which way to go to connect with the coyote on the US side of the border. Along the way, there might be friendly spotters in the desert who help them reach their destinations relatively safely.

These coyotes are getting really rich off of payments from drug smugglers who will give them about anything to get their illegal cargo into the US. Icing on the cake comes from honestly hard working, poor people who just want to get into the United States where (from their vantage point) there are endless day jobs that will set them up nicely. (These more menial jobs, they hear, US citizens themselves won't even consider taking.) On the other hand, some of these coyotes are ***also*** try-

ing their best to help their people get into a country that can provide adequate health care, a solid education, employment lucrative enough to have some money left over at the end of the month to send to family back home, and high quality food to give their children to eat – even if it's at a shelter or out of a dumpster.

If approached by a group of Latinos, trying to find their way north without benefit of proper scrutiny or documentation, what would the Good Shepherd do? I wouldn't want to answer for him.

Scripture that tells us that Jesus was one who would heal the sick and the suffering, inform the more and less educated, save the rich and poor. The Word of the Lord tells us that Jesus' love knows no borders. What's more, that his love transcends all boundaries to reach anyone who would benefit from his guiding mercy and grace. (I think that Jesus actually came up that adage that we should love our friends but love our enemies more but for an entirely different reason than we use it today.) Jesus our Shepherd "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."

Then we read John 10:1, "Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs it another way is a thief and a bandit." And we have the benefit of the press that informs us of difficult situations, dangerous outcomes, suspicious circumstances. So it's easy for us to wonder about those who try to enter through another gate, even if we're talking about the border crossing into the US and not the pearly gates leading to heaven. And so we become wary. We become wary when we hear about the influx of illegal immigrants coming into the US. We become wary when we ***see*** what we perceive as evil amidst good. And we become quick to conclude what is right from all that seems wrong.

This is the Fourth Sunday of Easter (3 weeks after Easter), which we call Good Shepherd Sunday. It's the Sunday in our liturgical year when we celebrate Jesus as our good shepherd - the one who guides us along through life's most difficult paths, the one who feeds our bodies and our souls, the one who laid down his life for his sheep and leads us through the sheepfold into eternal life. This is the day we celebrate the promises of scripture we hear in the 23rd psalm that Susan Andrews, former Moderator of our General Assembly says, are: "rest, restoration and security – those promises made even and especially in the midst of enmity and danger and death." This is Good Shepherd Sunday and we're challenged to listen for Christ's voice as we walk along the narrow pathways of life. We're challenged to listen for when and how Christ is calling us to live within ourselves, with one another, with him – all to God's glory.

This is the Sunday in our liturgical year when we celebrate that Christ is our guide. Yet, we often plug our ears to block out what we do not want to hear him say. We often cover our eyes to keep ourselves from seeing what we do not want to see him showing us. We burrow into our own safety zones out of fear for what opening our lives to Jesus' message might truly mean. We jump to our own conclusions, oblivious to what Jesus shepherds

us to know. This is the Sunday in our liturgical year when we are called (as we are called on *every day* of the Christian year,) to follow him.

As members of the body of Christ, when we read the newspaper or hear some commentator's rant, we're called to read with the eyes of a Christian and listen with the ears of a Christian. Because Jesus is present in our lives, we have a perpetual summons to experience what's happening all around from a different angle. So that each issue we encounter – even those that we'd rather label as a partisan issue – is for us a Christian concern. No issue in life should be sidestepped as irrelevant or marked as inappropriate for the church because we are Christians experiencing life with the mind of Christ as our guide…which makes everything a Christian concern.

Three years ago, I was in Reynosa, Mexico, with a group of five other adults and 20 senior high school students. We were there on a mission trip with the church. Our goal was to build two cinder block houses for people who live with such depths of poverty that, I can guarantee you, you have never seen inside our US borders. It was the second day of our trip when the drug lords waged war on the federalés. The war was waged right there in Reynosa, while we were working that day. Fortunately, we were by then on the outer edge of the city limits down a mud path of a road where people were too poor for drug lords to have interest. We didn't hear the gunshots and the bazookas being fired. We didn't see the truckloads of federalés driving through town that the parents were seeing on Headline News. We didn't see people running and hiding for dear life. We didn't see the ambulances come to carry off the hurt, the dying and the dead. We Had No ***Idea.***

During our lunch break, someone from our sponsor mission in Reynosa came out to warn the adults what was going on. They told us that the border crossing had been closed and there was no guarantee that we would be able to get back to our Texas retreat center for the night. (Remember: 6 adults and 20 16 year old boys and girls.) Joe and I, along with the other leaders from our church were a *little* more than nervous. But as we told the high school kids what was going on, we tried not to let it show. The weird thing was that most of the kids were totally into it. History in the making, and they were right there!

As luck would have it and after a good, long wait we were able to cross back into Texas that evening. In spite of the danger, every boy and girl there couldn't wait to go back the next day. Curiosity was undeniable, but so was their sincere desire to help the deeply impoverished people they got to know that day

of working on the houses. The parents? Not so much. Their fear, their understandable fear for their children, prevailed.

Most of us were required to stay in Texas the rest of the week to work on homes for migrant workers living in McAllen. Talk about a group of deflated kids! But to think and act with the mind of a Christian doesn't mean to have a careless disregard for possible danger in our midst. Sometimes our heads have to rule our hearts. There was no way those parents were going to let their kids cross back into Reynosa, and we didn't blame them.

As we walk through our lives, exposed to this news report and that exposé, we can remember that our call as Christians is to not live our lives in fear of the unknown or the potentiality of something awful, but to live our lives in love of the possibilities of something amazing. A life with Christ as our shepherd is a life that is in relationship with the other sheep of Christ's pasture, in as many forms and varieties as there are sheep. A life with Christ as our shepherd calls us to life our lives in relationship with others and not in fear for how we might relate to others'. A life with Christ is not oblivious to the tragic truths of our base humanity. Those tragic truths inform our fears and sometimes lead us to zig when we might otherwise zag. But a life with Christ is a life that is prayerful and discerning, lived as best we can reflective of how Jesus, himself, might have lived if faced with a similar situation today.

One of the tremendous advantages that Presbyterians enjoy amidst our body is a wide breadth of perspectives amongst our membership. We have members who interpret scripture with a more literal perspective and we have members who interpret scripture with a more metaphorical one. This range of interpretation leads our members to live out their Christianity in as many ways as there are in between. But to be a body that is reformed and always reforming, as our Presbyterian Church USA purports to be reformed and always reforming, requires that the mindset through which we make decisions on issues of the day be a mindset that is informed through careful and continual reading of scripture and prayerful and prolific conversations with God. It is only when we are so disciplined that we can draw conclusions on major issues of the day and say that we are, indeed, addressing them as Christians.

So, I'm not here to tell you that you should believe one way or another about certain social issues of the day. I'm certainly not here to tell you one way or the other how to vote. But I am here to tell you that you just can't float through life making random choices in what you believe because of a base sense of fear (or love!), even if you don't intend for one of those emotions to be at the root of your

response. I'm here to tell you that as a Christian, you have a *responsibility* to read the paper, listen to the news, talk with friends, talk with the *mayor, for Pete's sake* with a mind for how Christ is calling you to participate in the situation. I'm here to tell you that as a Christian you have a responsibility
to think theologically and not obliviously. When you're not sure that you've got it right, go back to our Good Shepherd and ask his advice.

Are we thinking with the mind of Christ as we read the newspaper, hear the evening news, talk with friends or rage on about the Yankees payroll? There's a consultant who said, "If they look down at their shoes, you're probably on to something." Thinking theologically about life can often make us uncomfortable. Thinking theologically – prayerfully and with a mind toward scriptural call – Takes one more step (and sometimes many) and can be awfully hard stuff! But we should be critical of our own discernment process, making decisions based on our Christian understanding of the good news of our Good Shepherd, Jesus, and coming to conclusions only after prayerful reflection, remembering as the hymn reminds, "My Shepherd will supply my need; Jehovah is His name. In pastures fresh he makes me feed, beside the living stream. He brings my wandering spirit back when I forsake his ways. And leads me for his mercy's sake in paths of truth and grace." Amen

First Presbyterian Church

15 Shuart Lane

Ramsey, New Jersey 07446

201-327-3879 www.ramseypc.org