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## “Sharing S’more”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Christ the King Sunday (Year A)

November 23, 2014

Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24; Matthew 25:31–46

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*“I myself will shepherd my sheep,” says the Lord God.*

*“I myself will seek them out, rescue them on a day of clouds and thick darkness,  
bring them out, gather them up, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak,  
and feed them.”*

I confess that I don’t know much about the ways of sheep,

either their habits or caring for them, having grown up in the city.

And I don’t know much about shepherds either, having never met one in the flesh  
that I can recall.

But I do know something about *being shepherded*, about being cared for like sheep,  
due in large part, I think, to the eight years I spent as a member of Troop 33,  
of the Hornets’ Nest Council of the Girl Scouts of Mecklenburg County  
that met every Tuesday afternoon in the basement  
of Myers Park Methodist Church in Charlotte.

I was a member of that troop from the fourth grade until I graduated from high school,  
including the two summers that I worked as a Counselor in Training  
at Camp Occoneechee, a Girl Scout Camp near Lake Lure.

Mrs. Pixley, our scout leader all those years, was our shepherd.

She is the one who rescued us on a day of clouds and thick darkness

when she helped us pitch tents for a camp-out at Julian Price Park in the

NC mountains, advising us implicitly NOT to touch the side of our tent  
if it should rain, or the water would seep through.

But when the clouds billowed into thick darkness and the rain began to  
patter on the tent surface, we thought, "How much harm could it do, really,  
to just touch one little finger to the roof of the tent?"

So I did. My right index fingertip made contact with the yellow-beige tent canvas,  
and a dark circle began to form where my finger had touched,  
perfectly round, almost like a cigarette burn, and a drop of water formed there  
and fell from the tent top to the tarp on the floor.

She may have been right, my tent-mates and I surmised, but one test  
does not an experiment conclude. So other little fingers rose up  
and touched the tent top, and more droplets of water formed and fell.

Oh no, we thought, we'd better go get Mrs. Pixley and see what we should do.

Running out into the rain with flashlights swinging, we brought her into our tent  
where she noted the inky spots on the tent-top,  
and she asked benignly, "You didn't touch the tent ceiling did you?"

"No ma'am", we replied politely. "Something must be wrong with our tent."

To which she neither chastised nor criticized us, but swiftly rearranged the  
floor tarp to redirect the running water elsewhere  
and repositioned our sleeping bags away from river now running through it.

"I hope it doesn't happen again," she said, closing the tent flap behind her,  
her flashlight beam disappearing once more into the clouds and thick darkness.

*"I myself will shepherd my sheep," says the Lord God.*

*"I myself will seek them out, rescue them on a day of clouds and thick darkness,  
bring them out, gather them up, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak,  
and feed them."*

Sometimes, Mrs. Pixley and her husband would *bring us out* of the gray urban world  
to give us a taste of living in the natural world, the green world.

She taught us to build camp fires, using kindling of small twigs and pine straw  
to get a fire started, before adding sticks and later logs  
with plenty of space between for air to circulate.

She taught us to respect fire, not to play with it, not to sit too close to it.

But when smoke would blow our way and make us cough, she'd say,

"You know, smoke follows beauty," which always made us feel good,  
even as we rubbed our eyes and cleared our throats.

She would let us experiment with our food around the campfire,

burning our marshmallows if we wanted, and blowing them out before  
placing them on graham crackers and chocolate squares for s'mores.

Marshmallows brûlée were way more exciting than mere toasted marshmallows!

And if we happened to dip our doughboys into the fire-ash while they were cooking,

she'd say, "That's okay. Just add more butter and jelly on the inside  
when you eat them, and you'll never notice the ash."

When it came to finding an appropriate location to dig a latrine,

she'd find the perfect spot that allowed for privacy and avoided  
any chance meeting with either snakes or poison ivy... thanks be to God.

But most of the time, she did not bring us out of the city

but *gathered us together* for our weekly meetings in the church basement  
to work on our Girl Scout badges.

Remembering Mrs. Pixley reminds me

that much of the education of women occurs outside of school!

She taught us to tie knots, to whittle, to sew, to cook, and to apply first aid.

We had girls in our troop who were barely passing at school;

we had girls in our troop who were not at all popular in school;

we had one girl in our troop who was battling lymphoma, which we didn't  
know about at the time;

we had one girl in our troop whose mother was battling cancer,

and that would have been me, but that was never mentioned.

Under Mrs. Pixley's care, we all felt normal, we all felt included,  
we all felt part of something larger than ourselves—a troop.  
We all felt protected from rain and fire, from snakes and poison ivy;  
we all felt beautiful, whole, saved and safe,  
even if only for a Tuesday afternoon, or for a long weekend.

After our weekly lesson was over, Mrs. Pixley allowed us time to play hide and seek  
in the bowels of that large church, which was one of the joys of my young life.  
It was dim and dank down there, much like the basement of our church here,  
and I remember hiding in the bathroom stalls, even the boys bathroom stalls,  
standing on the toilet paper holder, so my feet would not show  
below the stall.

And when time came for our parents to pick us up,  
Mrs. Pixley would *seek us out*, come and find us, turning on the lights  
to gather up her charges one last time and circle us up  
to recite the Girl Scout promise before turning us over to our parents.  
*On my honor, I will try to do my duty to God and my country,  
to help other people at all times, and obey the Girl Scout law.*

The promise is a worded a little differently now than it was then.

But I still think it's a pretty good moral code.

One of the nice things about Girl Scouts is that we didn't have to belong  
to the church where we met, or to any church at all to be included.  
As a matter of fact, most of us were not members of the Methodist Church  
where we met and ran wild.

**But we did have this promise and this shepherd who held us together.**

After a series of particularly bad and selfish leaders—bad shepherds, Ezekiel calls them,  
who stuff their faces with curds and whey from the sheep  
and deck themselves in wool finery but don't take care of the actual sheep—  
God vows to come and look after his people  
scattered and lost in exile: seeking them out, rescuing them, bringing them out,

gathering them together, binding up the injured,  
strengthening the weak, feeding them according to their needs—  
the weak and injured first, but the fat and sleek not so much.  
And in their amazement and relief at the prospect of being rescued and loved  
*by God himself*, the exiles are reminded by God of a promise  
made to them long ago:  
“I will place over them *one shepherd*, my servant David, and he will tend them:  
he will tend them and be their shepherd.  
I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them.”  
**The promise is of one good shepherd who tenderly cares about their welfare.**

And Jesus, when he comes along some 500 years later, fulfills that Davidic promise  
as a prince among shepherds, but in an alarming way:

**he turns the task of shepherding over to the sheep!**

Imagine... all of us being shepherds/pastors of this congregation!!! That's crazy!  
And what is required of the sheep of his pasture is NOT that they  
voice the same pledge or belong to the same troop or sport the same  
color of wool or follow the same path.

What *is* required of these sheep is that they care for others—that's all—  
that they help other people *at all times*, not just some of the people  
some of the time, but all of the people in the way of God himself,  
who sought them out, rescued them, gathered them together,  
bound up, strengthened, and fed the weak and undernourished.

And to make it plain for them because sheep are not known for their intelligence,  
Jesus tells them who they need to care for: the hungry, the thirsty,  
the stranger, the underdressed, the sick, and the imprisoned.

Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine tells it this way:

“Jesus is... concerned about relationships: between parents and children,  
siblings, neighbors, leaders and followers;  
he emphasizes caring for the other, mutual reciprocity, servant leadership,

and humility... The Sheep and the Goats insists that it is not religious confession,  
but caring for others—feeding the hungry, visiting people in prison,  
clothing the naked—that will bring entrance into the heavenly kingdom.  
(And if you are unfamiliar with the parable and you find yourself at the pearly gates,  
where there are lines marked “Sheep” and “Goats,” get into the sheep line).”

(Levin, Amy Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus.*, p. 12)

Or to express this imperative in good Girl Scout terminology,  
widen the circle around the camp fire so that everyone  
can squeeze in with their sit-upon;  
share your s’mores and doughboys so that no one  
need climb into a sleeping bag hungry;  
include girls who are not so girly,  
and even occasionally boys who also could benefit from  
some outside-of-school education;  
provide uniforms for the those who can’t afford to buy their own  
so that they, too, will feel like part of something larger than themselves;  
protect from rain and fire, snakes and poison ivy,  
those lacking the good sense to not touch a tent top in a rain storm;  
and keep life normal for those who are sick, or who have  
sick or imprisoned family members.

Perhaps if we heard this parable of Jesus, not as a top-down edict,  
but as bottom-up upgrade from sheep to co-shepherds,  
we would also hear it as our empowerment to act in the way of Jesus,  
in the way of David, in the way of God himself,  
who seeks, rescues, gathers, binds up, strengthens, and feeds,  
and encourages us to do the same.

And perhaps if we took this to heart, as Jesus desires for all listeners  
who are invited to step into his parables and then act the parts  
in our lives as either sheep or goats,

perhaps our baskets out in the foyer would be overflowing every Sunday  
with non-perishable food for the Iglesia Emanuel food pantry  
and turkeys for their Thanksgiving feast;  
perhaps the shelves in Shirley Frederick's office would be overflowing  
every Sunday with blessing bags that families have made at home  
and brought in to share with the hungry who ring our doorbell here every day;  
perhaps volunteers would be jumping at the chance every month  
to work at Urban Ministries fixing breakfast and lunch for our hungry neighbors;  
perhaps we would have people, besides the deacons, going out  
to visit the homebound and maintaining long-term relationships with them;  
perhaps our church would have a more involved prison ministry  
besides sending Christmas cards to those on death row each year.

Christ the King Sunday, instituted in 1925, is the last Sunday in our liturgical year,  
a time for us to sum up what we have experienced this past year,  
a time to live as if Christ were coming today in all his heavenly glory,  
a time to look forward to the coming season of Christ, the Messiah,  
who enters human history as a powerless baby.

It's our moment to prioritize where we stand in the great scheme of God's plan  
and to reconsider what new forms of living are required of us.

Many of the iconic depictions of Christ the King, or Christ the Shepherd-King,  
have him standing with his left arm cradling either an orb,  
which symbolizes the world, or in some cases, even a little lamb.

And typically his right hand is raised in blessing with two fingers pointed upward,  
as if he were about to touch the top of the tent that  
separates heaven from earth,  
so that a little bit of heaven might start seeping through.

Today's texts remind us that the sovereign rule of Christ is a paradox.

The high Christology expressed in Ephesians 1 speaks of God endowing Jesus Christ with unequivocal power and strength:

“That power is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (Ephesians 1:19–23)

The low Christology from passages in Ezekiel and Matthew’s Gospel complement this depiction of Christ’s kingly lordship

not with impressive and flashy demonstrations of power but with humble acts of nurture, protection, mercy, and sharing, not unlike that of a shepherd for his or her sheep.

Christ, the Anointed One, the Shepherd-King, has put his trust in us, his people and the sheep of his pasture, and he calls us and challenges us to prepare the way for his coming again, not by rolling out the purple carpet, but by giving ourselves away in love, by helping other people at all times, in the Way of Christ who is always shepherding us. Amen.