

## **“Shepherds and Nurses”**

*Nurturing Leaders in the Church*

*Sixth in a series on a “Vision for Ministry”*

Matthew 9: 35-38

Numbers 11:10-17

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**Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all these people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all these people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once-- if I have found favor in your sight-- and do not let me see my misery."**

**So the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."**

When you think about leaders, what comes to mind? Think for a minute. Make a mental note. Maybe even jot something down on.

What do you think of? Celebrities. Power. Wealth. Winning. This week everybody in America knows the name of that 23 year old swimmer from Maryland. Some of you have told me you'll be glad when the Olympics are over, so you can finally get some sleep! Even I have departed from my usual "no TV" stance to stay up too late watching for which country is going to win the next event. Who's going to triumph? Who'll take the lead? Someone from the congregation even wrote the "medal count" on the dry erase board in the choir room.

We love it when America takes the lead in the gold. Some even pooh-pooh the silver and the bronze, which is beyond me, but I guess it speaks to our obsession with being #1.

It's been pretty exciting. As exciting as it is, it is a picture of leadership that is not Biblical. The Bible gives us a very different image of leadership, which has nothing to do with winning, endorsements, money, or being the center of attention. It is leadership of the lowly. Today our scriptures paint two pictures of God which are anything but glamorous, and about as far down from powerful as you can get. The pictures the Bible paints have much more to do with nurture than with dominance. They are about servants, not super athletes, giving, not gaining.

In the Gospel, God is a lowly shepherd. In the Old Testament, God is a woman with a baby at her breast. We can't be sure, but this may even refer to a wet nurse, a humble task indeed.

The shepherd as pastoral caregiver is familiar to us. There are many shepherds in scripture. The shepherd king (Saul, David, Cyrus), God as shepherd, Jesus as the good shepherd. The Lamb of God *becomes* the shepherd in Revelation 7 in a strange mix of metaphor. While we may romanticize the shepherd, shepherds were a lowly bunch: homeless, disconnected, often without family. In Jesus' time shepherds were hired hands; often they were single; always they were male. They were what my father used to refer to as "the great unwashed". They slept in caves or in fields. They were probably hungry a lot. It was a very hard and simple life.

I suppose the same could be said of wet nurses, women hired to nurse others' babies. The most famous wet nurse in scripture was Moses' mother, whom Pharaoh's daughter *hired* to feed Moses in a delightful twist of fate. While we may be repelled at this ancient practice, it was common in many cultures (even our own) up until the last century.

Shepherds and wet nurses. The Lord God.

I did a little research on sheep this week. We tend to think of sheep as dumb, but apparently they are smarter than cows (though not as smart as pigs). So I'm guessing that sheep rank right up there with dogs, because pigs are supposedly smarter than dogs.

One the reasons sheep are thought to be dumb is because their faces are "hard to read", with their long mournful noses and their eyes set high and wide. They have poor eyesight and they are pretty

defenseless against predators. All they can do is run. But if you've ever seen sheep run, you know wolves run faster. Plus with bad eyesight, running away might not be the best strategy anyway. The other tidbit I learned about sheep was when they are lying on their backs, they cannot get up! They need help. If they don't get help, they will literally starve on their backs.

When Jesus saw his people, as it says so beautifully in the King James version, "he was moved with compassion on them, because they *fainted*, and were *scattered abroad*, as sheep having no shepherd". This is the only translation that uses the words "fainted" and "scattered". If we squint through the words on the page, we can just about see the helpless sheep on the hillside, vulnerable, open to the elements, susceptible to the wolves.

All this is to say, sheep need a shepherd. To lead them to water, to fend away the predators, and to pick them up when they fall down. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus (the good shepherd) subcontracts shepherding duties to his disciples. Even Jesus couldn't do it all alone. He needed at least twelve leaders.

Turning to the book of Numbers, I didn't feel compelled to do research on nursing babies. Most of us have some experience nurturing infants, even if we did not have our own. We know how vulnerable infants are, how much attention they need. The human infant will soon die without care and feeding. The nursing mother and the suckling infant need no more explanation.

It may seem odd to think of God in female terms. Moses is overburdened with the responsibilities of leadership and he complains to God. "Did I give birth to all these people?" he says. "Did I nurse them"? This feminine image of God occurs in both the Old and New Testaments. God is a lowly woman. But God, in God's nurturing way, responds to Moses' plea for help and sends the Spirit to the 70 who will help Moses lead the people. God knows there is much work to be done. Many leaders are called to it, not just one.

Even if you never assume a 'formal role' of leadership in the church, even if you are never a teacher or elder or volunteer coordinator, you, too, are leaders. Walter Wright, President of Regent College in Vancouver goes so far as to say "every person in the church is a leader--- at least they should be."<sup>1</sup> This is based on the idea of the church as the people of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter C. Wright, Jr., *Leadership among the people of God*, The Living Pulpit, Oct-Dec 2000, pp. 24-25.

We'll talk more about that next week. But for now, the main idea is we are all supposed to serve.

Because leadership, in the Body of Christ, isn't about winning, it's about service. Leaders discover and unveil *everyone else's* gifts. The best leaders are humble. They are not territorial. They surround themselves with other gifted leaders. They rejoice when others step forward to lead. Leaders see the potential of others in the Body of Christ and work to unlock that potential.

Everyone should be a leader in the church because everyone should serve. Yes, the church needs your service, but much more importantly, you **need** to serve. We were created to love and serve God. Much of our leadership potential is not exercised. Instead, it is underground, hidden, waiting to be released. Our challenge is to discover how we might tap into God's power to unlock it.

Too many leaders and not enough followers? Too chaotic? Maybe. Sharing leadership can get messy. Being open to the Spirit of God is risky and unpredictable. We have to step out in faith to allow God to act through others, even when it may not be exactly what **we** would do.

And we have to admit we need God's help. This is what Moses did. This is what Jesus did! Those of us who are already leaders in the church need to be willing to give up control, to make room for the Spirit of God to act in unpredictable ways. To allow others to unlock their leadership and set it loose.

As we prepare to enter Fall, as we seek leaders in our congregation, as we think toward the future of God's ministry in this church, pray with me. Not just today, but every day. Pray for new ways to nurture leaders. Pray that more will take part in opportunities already there. Pray that God will send us a gifted CDC director, energetic elders, new congregation members with fresh ideas. Pray for your own way of serving. Perhaps you are tired and need something new. Maybe there's something you've always wanted to do, but you just haven't voiced it. Look inside yourself and examine your role and your talents. Where is your passion? What gives you energy? This is your area to lead.

The good news is we really don't have to work nearly as hard or as long as Michael Phelps to win gold for the kingdom of God.

"The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray then that the Lord of the harvest will send forth labourers".