

The Lord is Our Shepherd

by: [Rebecca Dutius](#)

What's a shepherd to you? I guess if you are a long time Christian, you have plenty of images to answer that question with. It's a popular motif in the history of Christian art and symbolism. It's also the number one metaphor for our spiritual guides, our priests, pastors and church leaders. They are the shepherds of the church. Peter the apostle was the first to get this task from the Lord, in John 21, and many have followed. My guess, if you are not only a long time Christian but also a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender Christian, or a friend or family member of a GLBT Christian, you have also plenty of images of these earthly shepherds that may not quite match all those shepherd ideals we have been taught. I know I have. Although given the calling to be shepherds of the flock, they have turned against portions of that flock. They have sent some of God's sheep out in the cold, and have not tended to their needs.

Too numerous are the examples of GLBT Christians who, if they dare to come out of the closet, have been expelled from their churches or denominations, or have been denied the sacrament of communion. They have literally been driven away from God's flock. Sometimes even the suspicion is enough. The three Soulforce members and lifelong Catholics who were denied communion in the Mass held at the U.S. Catholic bishop's national conference in Washington, D.C., last November are well-known, but far from unique, examples of this. A less well known example is the story I came across around the very same time. A young man, a lifelong Evangelical Protestant, was harassed and threatened by his pastor after coming out to the pastor in private. He was told his options were to repent of his orientation or to withdraw his membership in the church, if he did neither the pastor would out him to the whole congregation. There are also examples of how fellow members of the church have taken it upon themselves to do the driving away of individual members and the division of God's flock. A well-known Swedish Christian author, who is also gay, have given testimony several times about how the most painful thing that anybody ever did to him was when a man, a fellow member of the church, during service, physically blocked his way to receive communion, shouting, "God hates and curses you!"

This list could be made a lot longer. In fact, the number of such incidents in the Christian church is seemingly infinite. Most of you who read this

have your own stories you could add, as I have mine. But let's for a moment instead turn our focus to what the Bible has got to say. It appears that God has one or two things to say to these shepherds, and to our fellow sheep of the flock, as well as to us. I suggest we first look at Ezekiel 34. It's a prophesy given in another time than ours, and yet so consistent with our experiences. The first six verses says (in NIV-UK):

"The word of the LORD came to me Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no-one searched or looked for them."

This is, unfortunately, true on a very general level. Don't we all know, for instance, the shepherds who have only looked after themselves, who have used and exploited the flock for their own financial gain? But perhaps it can also speak specifically to our experience as GLBT Christians. Some of us have been more lucky than others, no doubt, but as a group we know, only too well, the shepherds who have not healed the sick, strengthened the weak, bound up the injured or brought back the strays (those "driven away," is the phrase used in KJV). So many of the shepherds we have experienced have rather fed into our fear and self-loathing than led us to a place of greater self-acceptance, to a place of healing. They have not brought back the ones of us driven away, but rather have taken active part themselves in the driving away. A few, very few, examples have been mentioned above, but we all have more than enough of these experiences ourselves to be able to relate to this Scripture passage.

What this text also tells us is that there are serious consequences when sheep are driven away from the flock. It's not only that they are no longer to be found in the same place as the rest of the flock, this Scripture passage tells us about how the scattered sheep become food for all the wild animals. When the shepherds sent to tend to God's entire flock deal harshly with some of the sheep, no matter if that means we are literally and physically separated from the flock, or if it means we are driven into the closet and thereby separated from any deeper level of community with our congregation, our flock, the consequences are that we all too easily become food for the wild animals. We become food for the wild animals we know by names such as self-loathing, depression, alcoholism and suicide. A gay, bisexual or transgendered teenager is at least three times more likely to commit suicide

than a straight teenager, some research suggests even higher numbers than that. But not all are equally at risk, there are dramatic differences between those who live in a healthy and tolerant surrounding, and those living in a hostile and homophobic or transphobic environment. The latter is the environment often offered in our churches.

And that brings us from the shepherds to the flock, because as we have already seen the shepherds are not the only ones driving away sheep from the flock, individual members of the flock, and the environment created by the flock as a whole, plays a huge part too. Ezekiel continues in verses 18-22 (NIV-UK):

"Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet? 'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another."

The first thing that strikes us with this picture is the chronology, and perhaps priority. When we think about sheep being driven away by their flock we probably think first about the physical driving away, the shoving with flank and shoulder and the butting with horns, but this description takes it's point of departure somewhere else entirely. It starts with the trampling of the good pasture and the muddying of the water. It's the destruction of the food and water, the transformation of it into something inedible and unhealthy, maybe even toxic. We don't need to think long about it to see that the same is true when parts of God's flock are driven away in our churches. What is our food and our water? The Bible tells us "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4, Deut 83). The Bible, the word of God, is our food and is our water, but homophobic and transphobic readings trample the food of the Scripture and turn the Bible's clear water toxic.

Many can bear witness of how these readings made the Bible say to us that God hates us, and what could be more devastating for the self-esteem of any believer. It makes the Bible feel like an enemy, something you need to defend yourself from, it tramples the food and muddy the clear water of the Bible. Like the text from the Ezekiel says, to our fellow Christians in heterosexual and gender normative congregations, it has not been enough that they are allowed to feed from the Bible's green pasture and drink the clear, pure, water. They have not been satisfied with less than that no one else is able to. They need the Bible to be their own, and nobody else's. This wish to put oneself above others is nothing new, the Gospel according

to Mark reveals that even the first disciples, the apostles, argued about who of them was the greatest. But Jesus told them, that in the kingdom of God, to be the first you need to be the servant of all (Mark 9:33-37). The servant of ALL, not of the chosen few. That was valid when Jesus uttered those words, and it's still valid today.

When the flock has taken food and water from some of the sheep, it goes on to drive those sheep out and away through shoving with flank and shoulder, and butting with the horns. This shoving and butting can be, among many things, the hurtful and phobic remarks or jokes, uttered face to face, in social settings or even during sermons. The remarks that make us crawl even deeper into our closets, and lower our self-esteem even more, giving us as food to the wild animals. If we are still in the closet, those of our sisters and brothers making the remarks may not know that they are targeting us. That is, they don't know that our face and name is among those God's GLBT children, who they are clearly aware that they are targeting. The driving out could also be done through the excommunication or expelling of known GLBT members of the church. These remarks, these actions, and these attitudes are empowered by the excluding and phobic readings of the Bible, just as much as those readings stem from that same fear and hate itself.

So is it hopeless then? Are we to remain scattered portions of the flock, with no shepherd? No. God will not have it. This prophecy in Ezekiel goes on to tell us of God's promise to us. God will not allow for some sheep to be left out, to wander over all the mountains and on every high hill, with no one looking out for them. If the shepherds called to tend to God's flock, will not do their work, then God will do the job. God will be the shepherd of the scattered flock. If both the earthly shepherds and the rest of the flock are more interested in driving us out than in bringing us back, then God will take up the search.

The conversation between a then defrocked Pentecostal pastor and another man, who had just been harassed by police officers for being gay, taking place in Los Angeles in 1968 is world famous by now:

"'We're just a bunch of dirty queers and nobody cares about dirty queers!'
'Somebody cares.'
'Who?'
'God cares.'" (From: Don't Be Afraid Anymore, by Rev. Troy Perry, p. 34)

These words are actually something more and far more valuable than just famous, they also contain the truth, at least according to the Bible. Verses 11-16 in the chapter we have been reading (Ezekiel 34, NIV-UK), says:

"'For this is what the Sovereign LORD says I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places

where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."

Yes, God cares. So much that God is willing to do the shepherding work, to search for the sheep driven away by flock and shepherd, and tend to their needs. The God speaking in Ezekiel is not a God who does this reluctantly, in an attitude of "Well, alright then, if I really have to." It's a God who reacts passionately and with pain upon hearing how some of the sheep have fared, how the shepherds and flock have mistreated them, and whose reaction is to personally and lovingly take on all the care and work involved in tending to the scattered flock. God doesn't send angels to replace the bad shepherds. God *is* our shepherd. And some shepherd, too!

The entire chapter 34 clearly shows that God is not only a shepherd for us, but indeed the good shepherd. I will not quote all of it, but the verses 26-29 are especially moving to me:

"I will bless them and the places surrounding my hill. I will send down showers in season; there will be showers of blessing. The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops the people will be secure in their land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They will no longer be plundered by the nations, nor will wild animals devour them. They will live in safety, and no-one will make them afraid. I will provide for them a land renowned for its crops, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land or bear the scorn of the nations."

God is the good shepherd who will heal us from fear, will again make the Scripture good pasture and clear water for us and no longer will we be the victims of spiritual famine or spiritual thirst. Our thirst will be quenched with the living water that can not be taken away from us (John 4:13-14). Jesus confirms that God is indeed our shepherd when he says, "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:13). In the same context, Jesus also confirms that the scattered sheep have not been forgotten. John 10:16 reads, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

God says to the scattered flock, to us, in the very last verse of this chapter "You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD.' " (Ezekiel 34:31)

Yes, we are people, and the Sovereign LORD is our God, we can all truly say with king David, "The Lord is our shepherd, we shall not be in want."

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