Sheep and shepherds: Mark 6:30-34,53-56:Sixth Sunday Pentecost16th Sunday Ordinary Time

by H. Stephen Shoemaker in the July 5, 2000 issue

These days churches are tempted to mimic corporations, and pastors try to become CEOs. But these texts call us to re-imagine our life together as the people of God, and the texts' images are of sheep and shepherds. In Mark 6 Jesus is pictured as a shepherd-king with Godlike "compassion" as he looks upon the multitude wandering "like sheep without a shepherd."

What can we mostly urban folk know of sheep and shepherds? André Dubus wrote about spending a year in a New Hampshire farmhouse. It seemed an idyllic setting and the rent was cheap, so he moved in and agreed to take care of the landlord's eight sheep.

The sheep-keeping proved to be more of an ordeal than he could ever have imagined. Dubus found himself chasing down sheep that found every possible way to get out of the fence and that were impossible to lead back through the gate. After a few weeks he was tackling them, sometimes not so gently, so that he could lug them back and hoist them over the fence. The biblical analogy of humans to sheep took a different turn: "We were stupid helpless brutes, and without constant watching we would foolishly destroy ourselves."

A deacon in my church does not want the deacon-caring ministry called "shepherd ministry" because it implies a certain stupidity on the part of the sheep/parishioners. Most members of my congregation prefer the title "senior minister" to "pastor" because the latter has taken on an authoritarian cast of a shepherd who rules over the flock.

Are our corporate or management images of leadership any better? A *New Yorker* cartoon pictures a slender, bespectacled man standing before a flock of sheep. He is dressed in a cap, windbreaker, slacks and shoes ill suited to the task, and carries a

briefcase. He says, “Your shepherd Louie has retired. I’m Mr. Smathers. I will be your grazing-resource coordinator and flock welfare and security manager.”

Jesus sees the multitude as “harassed and helpless” (and Matthew adds the phrase, “like sheep without a shepherd”). What issues from him is compassion. He saw the sick and his compassion healed them. He saw the demon-possessed and his compassion freed them.

The Gospel writers seem cautious with the word. It is the divine compassion attributed only to God and Jesus, and we humans generally have it in short supply. But Jesus was freer with the word, and used it in three of his most famous parables.

There was a king who was owed a huge debt by his servant. When the servant could not pay, the king ordered him thrown into slavery, along with his family. When the servant pleaded for mercy the king “had compassion” on him and forgave the huge debt.

A man going down to Jericho fell among thieves who beat him, robbed him and left him to die. Two high-ranking religious officials passed by him, but a Samaritan stopped and “had compassion” on him. He bandaged the man’s wounds and carried him to an inn where he nursed him through the night. The next day he paid the bill and gave the innkeeper his credit card, saying, “If he needs more, charge it to me.”

And there was the younger son who took his inheritance and squandered it in loose living. One day he “came to himself” and returned to his father’s house, not hoping to be restored as a son, but wanting only to be hired as a servant. His father saw him coming and “had compassion” on him. Before the son could sputter out his speech of repentance, the father placed on him a son’s ring and robe and shoes and called for a homecoming feast.

Such is the divine compassion: it heals and feeds, forgives huge debts, nurses hurt bodies back to health and welcomes home sinners, restoring them to a place of honor. Jesus will not let his compassion stay with God or in heaven. He commands: “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.”

Where can we get such compassion? The early desert fathers and mothers, *abbas* and *ammas*, found it as they went to the desert to be alone and pray. In the city it is easy to focus on the sins of others. In the desert they had themselves to deal with. The solitude of the desert became “the furnace of transformation” where they

learned compassion. And when they returned to “civilization” people experienced their compassion as the healing of God.

Here’s a story from the desert tradition: A brother had committed a fault and was called before the council. The council invited the revered Abba Moses to join, but Abba Moses refused. They sent someone to get him, and he agreed to come. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him to the council. They saw him coming with the jug leaving a trail of water, and asked, “What’s this?” Abba Moses said, “My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the error of another?” When the council heard these words they forgave the brother.

In solitude before God, faced only with ourselves, we learn the compassion of God. Perhaps it is not incidental that in the midst of ministry and the unrelenting needs of the crowd, Jesus, the good shepherd, called his disciples to join him in the desert: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.”

It is not all rest, all *shabbat* in the wilderness. There, wrestling with our own hearts in the darkness before God, we learn mercy—the shepherd’s prerequisite—and become a people of compassion.