



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Jump Start # 1794

Luke 15:5 "And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."

We have been doing a mini series about leaders. Leaders in the home are parents and leaders in the church are shepherds. Our times like the word "leaders." There are many leadership books found in bookstores. There is a whole segment of publications, seminars and blogs about "church leaders." These things show everything from how to grow a church, manage problems, and keep everyone connected. There are strong business models found in the church leadership programs. What works well in big business often does not work well in the church.

Our verse today reminds us of a special aspect of shepherding that is often overlooked by the experts of leadership. This passage is part of a three series of parables about lost being found. A lost sheep was found. A lost coin was found. A lost son was found. The lost was valuable. There was intense search taking place. When the lost was recovered, there was much joy and happiness.

In this first parable, about the lost sheep, Jesus states, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost..." Jesus states this thought as if it were a common practice and understanding. "What man among you...does not" The thought seems to be, 'this is something that we all do.' But that very principle has always struck me as being out of character for shepherds. Being a city guy, and not knowing much about sheep, but just thinking practically, it seems that if the shepherd left the 99 in the open pasture to chase after the one lost sheep, when he returned there might be 99 who are now missing. Since they were in "open pasture," as the text states, the shepherd might have to count his losses. One gone, but 99 still safe. That's how I would think things through. One of the underling principles is that each sheep is important to the shepherd, who is God. God doesn't count His losses. He is not ready to give up on any. He wants all to be saved.

When the lost sheep was found, as our verse tells us, the shepherd lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. The idea is that the sheep is wrapped around the shepherd's neck. That would do two things. First, it would allow the shepherd to travel faster to return to the flock. Like, holding a child in your arms, one can move faster that way. Secondly, the warmth of the shepherd's neck, was a sign of comfort, assurance and love. The shepherd didn't beat the sheep. He didn't drive it back to the flock. He carried it. This sheep must have been young. I doubt a shepherd could lift a full grown sheep and walk with it wrapped around his neck. With a lamb wrapped around your neck, you are going to smell like that lamb. That's part of shepherding. Carrying the sheep that way also built trust and hopefully a bond so that the sheep wouldn't wander off again.

(OVER)

Leading God's people carries this very idea. It's not standing on the hillside barking orders as the troops head off to battle. It's picking the sheep up. It's carrying them back to where they belong. It's putting them around your shoulders. Tenderness. Gentleness. Compassion. Love. Caring. Those are all expressions that come from carrying sheep around your shoulders. A trust level was developed. The sheep knew that the shepherd cared. I don't see in this story the fact that the shepherd "had to teach the sheep a lesson." I don't see the shepherd using guilt, shame or fear to get the sheep back. I don't see threats being used. The sheep was found. It was carefully picked up and carried back to the flock wrapped around the shepherd's neck. The shepherd was rejoicing. He was happy. He was not disgusted that it took extra time to go looking for this lost sheep. He didn't complain about how all of this inconvenienced him. He didn't explode saying that there wasn't time for this nonsense. It wasn't about the shepherd. It was about finding the lost sheep and returning him to where he belonged.

God's shepherds today would do well to give this some thought. It's easier to drive than it is to lead. It is easier to shout, stir up dust, and use ropes to get the cattle going. However, we are not on a cattle drive. We are to be shepherding sheep. Individual care. Tenderness. Compassion. These are what God's leaders need. Sheep have gotten too close to the world, and they need to be returned. Sheep have gotten confused and now they are not sure. Sheep have not been paying attention to their souls and now they are weak.

Carrying sheep around your neck-not everyone would do that. Giving lectures is easier. Pointing fingers is easier. Laying on the guilt is easier. Building bonds of trust through love and concern is hard. This is the difference that will make a difference. We don't literally put members around our shoulders. That would be a back breaker for most of us. What we do is hug. We hold the hand. We talk softly. We listen. We walk them through some steps. We follow up. We inquire. We pray with them and for them. We keep a close eye on them. We invite them to dinner. We pour hours and hours into their lives. We let them see goodness. We let them experience love. We rejoice with them. We worship with them. We are there for them. That's shepherding, God's style. There are no fast tracks to this. It's messy. After carrying sheep, the shepherd smells like sheep. He doesn't mind.

The boardroom approach to leading God's people fails. It lacks that touch and tenderness. Telling others what to do seems cold and distant. The shepherd must leave his place and go. He must find. He must place the lost sheep around his neck. He must rejoice as he returns. I expect the shepherd walking back to the flock, with the sheep around his neck, talked to that sheep. His voice, recognized by the sheep, gave assurance. He talked kindly. He talked often. Many of us have talked to our pets. Those that talk in kindness have seen the animals respond with a wag of the tail or a purr. The pets want to be around the person that is kind and gives attention to them. I expect this lost sheep, from our parable, hung pretty close to the shepherd's heels. He probably paid closer attention to the voice of the shepherd. His wandering days may have ended by the way the shepherd handled him and was kind to him.

What a great opportunity it is to lead God's people. Do this with faith, courage and love. Lead, as the Lord has led us. Leading God's people isn't about power or who "controls" the church. Those who think that way, ought never to be in that position. They will run the people off, rather than carry them back.

The shepherd understands that it was the Lord who has carried us back to where we belong. Who can ever forget that.

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