

One Of These Things Is Not Like The Others – Maria Koppelberger

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

In reading our texts for today, I immediately realized that one of these things is not like the others. Three of them center on a common theme, and one seems to have missed the memo. One of these things is not like the others. I'll give you a hint: today in the church calendar is the Sunday of the Good Shepherd. Psalm 23, definitely the most famous text of today's readings, centers on the provision of the Lord as a shepherd provides for sheep. In John 10, Jesus alludes to himself a shepherd, and in the following verses calls himself the Good Shepherd. In 1 Peter, the author describes the suffering of Christ, calls him the Shepherd. But in Acts, we don't hear anything about a shepherd or sheep or pasture. Let's take a closer look at this odd one out.

Acts 2:42-47 is an ideal picture of the Early Church. Scholars Ben Witherington and Craig Keener remind us that this is a summary statement that Luke makes, after gathering source material on the daily life and practices of this community. Taken in the context of the whole of Acts, we see that the church certainly had problems: rifts in the community, members acting unjustly, keeping secrets. But, on the whole, their daily life consisted of common worship, prayer, signs and wonders, teaching, and eating together. They provided for each by selling their possessions and distributing the resources. They looked out for one another.

In this respect, the Early Church is not unique in the Hellenistic world. Various philosophical schools gathered their members together to share a common life. Stories of these communities were part of Greco-Roman culture. Everyone knew of the utopia: the ideal society, promoted by Plato in his Republic. Another part of the Greco-Roman mythos idealized the life of the Spartans and quaint country-side communities. Other schools of thought promoted their own versions of an ideal society, like the Essenes at Qumran. Finally, a Hellenistic proverb says, "Friends share all things in common", so the idea of a community sharing together and providing for each other is not new when the Early Church picks it up.

It's not my purpose to convince you that the Early Church is unexceptional. Indeed, it is a special community, and in many ways it is a radical community. But in this snapshot we have in Acts 2:42, it's not their sharing together that sets them apart from other idealized communities, but rather their purpose in sharing life. They know the Good Shepherd and the Good Shepherd knows them. They provide for each other because God provided for them, currently provides for them, and they are confident in the hope that God will provide for them.

Let's consider the nature of the shepherd in Psalm 23. The shepherd keeps the sheep safe and provides for their needs for food and water. Remember, the Israelites looked back on a long history of the Lord providing for them. God delivered them from slavery at the hands of the Egyptians, then gave them food and water in the desert wandering. They, like sheep, could not care for themselves. So, instead, the shepherd leads them by still water, in green pastures, and the sheep and shepherd dwell together. Everything is going pretty well for them.

Now, I don't have a whole lot of experience with sheep. My last encounter with a herd of sheep

was last summer while hiking at Yellowstone National Park. I encountered a herd of bighorn sheep on the mountainside. They were peacefully munching away on the grass, seemingly without a care in the world. This reminds me of the scene we have in Psalm 23.

In contrast to this serene setting, the idea of the Good Shepherd is further developed in John and 1 Peter. In John, everything picks up a bit in intensity. Psalm 23 is a nice, safe setting. Everything is going great. But in John, there is a lot of trouble. The sheep in the passage in John encounter thieves and robbers. They run away from the strangers who try to harm them. The thieves are out to steal them, kill them, and destroy them. All this contrasts with the shepherd, who safeguards the life of the sheep.

In this passage, Jesus switches from parable of sheep and shepherd to plain speech. He is intent that they understand what he is trying to say to them. In the verses following our text in John today, Jesus comes right out with it. He says, *I am the good shepherd*. He fends off the wolves who seek to devour the sheep. He comes to their rescue and saves the sheep when even the hired hands run away, neglecting the sheep. But he does not neglect them. Jesus takes this a step further and goes out to find the lost sheep. Not only does he safeguard the flock that stayed together, but he also goes out to find the ones that would otherwise be lost. This image of the shepherd is more action-packed and risky than the Psalm 23 shepherd imagery.

Then 1 Peter takes it up a notch again on what it means to be the shepherd. The author tells of the suffering of Christ the Shepherd, sacrificed for the flock. 1 Peter 2:24-25 says, *He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.*

And here's the zinger: 1 Peter 2:21. The author speaks to the congregation, *For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps*. The writer says you are called to be like the shepherd. You, too, follow Christ's example of suffering for the sake of others.

The church in Acts 2 knows this shepherd, they're on their way to acting like him. But in this small snapshot we have today, they're more at the Psalm 23 level of intensity. Everything is good, the community is stable, they're worshipping, praising, sharing together. People are attracted to their community. they're teaching and preaching the Good News, and performing signs and wonders. It all sounds like a lot of fun.

But what we don't see in this picture is the Good Shepherd of John 10 and 1 Peter. So don't get hung up on the Acts 2:42 church as the ideal Christian community—that's just one little snapshot. Following the Shepherd means acting like the shepherd, which means suffering for the sake of others.

What suffering are you called to? What uncomfortable thing is God calling you to? What has God placed on your heart that you know is right, but you know you may suffer for it? Or what difficult thing is God calling you to continue doing? You are called to the path of righteousness.

The Shepherd leads you on the path of righteousness and that is a hard road.

Jesus did what was right and was beaten down for it. It may feel like **we** are getting beaten down and worn out for living righteously. If we act like Christ, individually and as a community, it is no easy thing. But, to encourage you today, know that we suffer toward a good end, toward the reconciliation of all things, manifest already and not yet. Christ is our example; the Good Shepherd and Guardian of our souls is with us every step of the way.