

2022 05 08 – Shepherding

John 10:22-30 (The Inclusive Bible)
Psalm 23

When I was in my twenties I would often reflect on my stage in life and think about what my mother was doing at the same age. Mom started having children at the age of 23 and by the time she was 32 all eight of us had arrived. As I lived my single life working for IBM in Toronto, I marvelled at the workload and the responsibility that my mother had at a similar age.

Jean Taylor raised eight children, pretty much on her own. My dad was around, but was busy with the farm and other side businesses, and didn't have a lot to do with our upbringing. When Colette and I arrived, identical twin girls, my mother already had three boys under the age of five, and yet she was still the one responsible for our around-the-clock care. She even slept downstairs on the pull-out couch, our bassinets beside her, so as not to impact our father's sleep. When we were growing up, her workday started at 6:30 a.m. and usually ended well after we had gone to bed.

On April 22nd, my mother celebrated her 90th birthday. She lives in a care home now and her mental and physical health make a large birthday gathering unadvisable. So my siblings and I joined her by Zoom instead. Her eight children now range from 58 to 67 years of age, and some have grandchildren of their own, but she is still our Mom. And, as we neared the end of our Zoom call,

Mom spoke the same words of farewell that she used when we were teenagers. She told us all to “be good.”

Today is Mother’s Day, also called Christian Family Sunday, and so today we recognize all the people in this world who are mothers or who have spent their lives mothering others. It is true, of course, that families take all shapes and forms. Some of us grow up with a mom and dad, some have two mothers, some have two dads, some are raised by single parents, or parents who live apart. Some are adopted, some are fostered, some grow up without any parents at all. And, for various reasons, some of us have had to create our own family circles.

Whether we were raised by our biological parents or not, most of us can name at least one person in our lives who has mothered us, who has provided us with love, nourishment, comfort, guidance or protection. Today’s scriptures describe that person, that role, as a shepherd. And it is true that the tasks of a shepherd are very similar to those of a mother, parent, or guardian.

Like the shepherd who leads their sheep to green pastures or still waters, a parent’s task is to provide their children with the physical, emotional and spiritual nourishment they need to survive and thrive. Our parents, especially our mothers, spend countless hours preparing, cooking and serving meals for their families. And think of all the hours parents spend holding their children, reading to them and rocking them to sleep. Even taking children outside, helping them connect with nature is a way of providing physical and spiritual nourishment.

My mother is at the stage of life where she quickly forgets a phone call or conversation. And yet I still call her regularly and tell her how good it is to hear her voice. Despite the change in our roles, there is still comfort in hearing her saying my name or telling me what the weather is outside her window. Our mother's voice is one of the first sounds that we hear. It is part of our soul, even long after we forget what it sounds like.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never be lost." One of the most challenging tasks of parenthood is leading children down the right path, the path of righteousness. I know parents agonize about keeping their children from making mistakes that will destroy their happiness or the happiness of others. But it's hard to know what kind of guidance to give. Probably, leading by example is one of the best ways we can guide our children. It certainly worked for Jesus and his disciples. But I have to admit, my mother's voice saying, "be good," is never far from my consciousness.

According to the 23rd Psalm, a shepherd also carries both a rod and a staff. The rod is a club used to fend off wild animals, while the staff has a longer, slimmer shaft and is used to keep the sheep from wandering off. One of the tasks of any parent is keeping their children safe. Of course, today's parents use much more sophisticated devices like seat belts, safety locks, cell phones, alarm systems, the list is endless. As children, we are comforted in the knowledge that our parents are there to protect us from monsters, boogie men and the bad dreams that wake us in the night.

Parents, of course, don't always get it right. Everyone makes mistakes and, thank goodness, children have an incredible resilience. But there are some parents who just don't have the ability or the skills to be good shepherds for their children. That's why our social services are so important and it's also why children need other shepherds in their lives.

Eventually, we all grow up and we become shepherds for others. Many of us become parents and some become teachers, coaches, ministers, and mentors. There are so many ways that we can impact the lives of others. One of the best ways to honour our own parents is to be a good shepherd for the many people who become a part of our lives.

One of the things that we learn as we grow older is that we never lose the need for someone to shepherd us, to lead us, to teach us, to protect us and to comfort us. We find those gifts in the people around us and we find them in the Holy Mystery that is always present in our lives. Jesus called that Sacred Spirit, Abba, which means Daddy. Some of us use names like Higher Power, Ground of our Being, Holy One, Essence of Love, or even Our Father, who art in heaven. No matter what name we use, it is comforting to know that we are not alone and that God's love is both unconditional and everlasting.

Today we are also recognizing Asian Heritage Month. In order to honour those of Asian heritage in our country, our community and in our congregation, I invited Jackie Orola Ravino and her sisters to sing during our service today. They came to Canada from the Phillipines and we are blessed by their family's presence in

this faith community. Jackie, Joevy, Jennifer and Ruth have chosen to sing a song written by Diane Warren and made famous by Celine Dion. It is called "Because You Loved Me." Diane Warren explains that she wrote this song as a way of honouring her father's influence on her life. The Orola sisters are singing it as a way to honour their parents and their Filipino heritage. It is a fitting tribute for Mother's Day. I invite you now to sit back and listen to the recording that Jackie and her sisters made for us this week.