

Ezekiel 34

I have been a Christian my whole life and didn't end up aligning with the tradition I was raised in. So, my personal faith journey has included experiencing all different kinds of churches and communities and religious teachings. And while I received what I needed to be who I am today and to fulfill my own vocational calling as a priest, I have also encountered many false teachings and abuses of power, and what in our reading this morning Ezekiel calls "False Shepherds".

Like many of you today, I have been hurt by the church and the people within it. How can we make sense of it when the church - a place of encountering the holy and growing in Christ and being supported within a loving community - becomes a place that is unsafe?

In the biblical narrative, while God wanted to be the true leader of Israel, the people cried out for a physical human leader, someone they could see and talk to directly, who could make them feel more secure in an unstable world. So, God appointed judges and then kings. Some ended up being corrupt, others, even in their best moments of leadership, were nuanced characters who could never lead the people perfectly.

All of this left Israel vulnerable to the attack of other nations, leading to the kingdom of Israel splitting into the northern and southern regions, and the southern kingdom—Judah—was taken captive, and all of its leaders were taken into exile in Babylon.

And so we meet Ezekiel this morning, a prophet from a priestly lineage, writing from his exile in Babylon. He sees clearly what has caused this exile—or separation between God's people, and is calling Israel's leaders—whom he calls False Shepherds—into account. Ezekiel says the leaders have been putting themselves first at the expense of the needs in their community. They have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, or bound the injured. They have not sought out those who wander off lost. Instead, their harsh, forceful

leadership has scattered the sheep, making them prey for wild animals. Instead of feeding their sheep, they have fed on them...devouring them. And sadly, while Ezekiel is calling out the kings and political leaders, it also includes the religious leaders like priests and elders. And sadly, this isn't an issue that has been completely resolved today. We still encounter corrupt leadership—and while it may be easy to point out in our political landscape, it can be harder to tease out in our churches, because our churches are meant to be a pure representation of God's presence in the world.

But there are False Shepherds within every Christian tradition and in every religion. Pastors, priests, elders who have been entrusted with spiritual leadership can abuse that privilege and power, and this abuse can take on many different forms. People may be hurt emotionally, psychologically, sexually, theologically, financially, and the list goes on.

Spiritual abuse is when someone uses spiritual or religious beliefs to hurt, scare, or control you. And it can include using religious texts or beliefs to rationalize abusive behaviors...like telling someone who is gay they are an abomination to God, or telling a woman she must submit to male authority, cannot contribute her gifts, and must remain silent, or telling a child if they don't believe Jesus is their lord and savior they are going to be eternally tormented in hell. You may have experienced this or something similar in your own life, and I am so sorry that that has been part of your story. It was a misrepresentation of God's love.

While spiritual abuse creates traumas we can carry throughout our lives, these same traumas can also be healed and transformed as we get out from under the False Shepherd's leadership and learn to pattern our lives after the True Shepherd. Ezekiel says to his community:

"Thus says the Lord God, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand the sheep at their hand...I will rescue my sheep from their mouths".

Ezekiel goes on to describe God the True Shepherd who seeks out the sheep, rescues them from places of spiritual darkness. God feeds the sheep with nourishing, sustaining food, in a safe pasture. God binds up the injured, strengthens the weak, and feeds the sheep with justice. And in the gospels Jesus likens himself to the Good Shepherd: He says his sheep know the sound of his voice, and because of this they won't follow a stranger, but will run away from him.

It is so, so important to know God's indwelling love for ourselves, to trust our inner guidance and discernment and not just an external authority, and to always measure our inner discernment against Jesus' example of love, just living, compassion and inclusion. And it is imperative to differentiate spiritual leaders and the church from God. God is made manifest in the gathered body of Christ and in our sacraments, but God is bigger than any clergy, any tradition or religion. Even when a leader has divine insight and wisdom and is truly gifted by God, they are not God. They are meant to be vehicles of God's limitless love and grace but will always be an imperfect human representation.

So, how can we learn to recognize the Good Shepherd's voice in the voices around us? Here are a few ways I have learned and found helpful:

Ask yourself: does this teaching sound like love? The Apostle Paul tells us that even the most knowledgeable, faith filled, and spiritually advanced leaders are just noisy gongs and clanging cymbals if they don't have patience and kindness, if they are boastful and arrogant and rude, or if they insist on their own way.

Ask yourself: does this teaching sound like truth? The three pillars of the Episcopal Church are scripture, reason, and tradition. While the Bible can be a starting point, we also need to bring all of our knowledge and reason and life experience to how we interpret these ancient writings. We must think critically, ask questions, and disagree if needed. We never need to suspend reality to be a Christian, and we need to apply everything we know about

healthy loving relationships to how we relate to God and read the scriptures.

Ask yourself: how does this teaching feel in my body? Does your body tighten and constrict? Do you feel fear and shame, judged, controlled or manipulated? Or does your body feel safe, relaxed, and open? Does it feel reinforced as God's beloved creation?

Ask yourself: what fruits is this teaching producing? Is it leading you to fear other people, or have prejudices against beliefs and lifestyles that are different than your own? Is it leading to controlling behaviors in your own life, or is it leading to more unity, understanding and compassion? Is it helping you see God in all people and in yourself? Is it challenging you to act more justly, seek reconciliation, and embody more for Christ's love?

I encourage you to identify some of the false teachings you may have internalized, and to look at some of the pain you may be carrying from misrepresentations of God's love. You may want to talk to a therapist or a spiritual director or a trusted friend. Bring your adult understanding to things you may have learned as a child. Start teasing out what you want to keep and what no longer holds true.

May you know what real love sounds and feels like in the essence of your being. May God bind up any of your wounds that have been inflicted by the church and the people within it. May God put you in safe communities where you can be spiritually nourished. May you have the courage to think and choose for yourself. And may you be free of false teachings and false shepherds. May you be free of all that misrepresents God's love. May you be free.