

“A Shepherd the Perfect Metaphor”

By Carol Medley

Our theme hymn for this year is one of my favorites, “Savior like a Shepherd lead us”. As with many of our beloved hymns, it is a song of prayer. It is also a song filled with comforting words of assurance. “Savior, like a shepherd lead us, much we need thy tender care; In thy pleasant pastures feed us, For our use thy folds prepare; Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, thou hast bought us, thine we are. We are thine, do thou befriend us, Be the Guardian of our way; Keep thy flock, from sin defend us, Seek us when we go astray; Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Hear, O hear us when we pray.

Christ is indeed the Good Shepherd of the sheep, as well as the gate of the sheepfold. That is to say, The Good Shepherd calls us, He leads us, and He nurtures His sheep. He owns us, knows us by name, and is personally invested in our care. When we think of the Good Shepherd we often picture a peaceful pastoral scene with sheep contentedly grazing in green pastures by a gently flowing brook. In John 10:9, Christ Himself – the Good Shepherd boldly declares “I am the door: by me if any man enter it, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture”. Christ is our guide; He has not left us without instruction for being the shepherd of His flock. One of the most profound guides that we have is the perfect outline given to us through His Word.

Looking back in the Old Testament, it was very common for those in the ancient Near East to refer to their rulers as shepherds. Moses was called a shepherd. King David was the greatest shepherd of them all. When God called Moses from out of the burning bush and told him he was going to lead God’s people out of Egypt, what was Moses doing at the time? He was shepherding his father-in-law’s flocks. When David was anointed by Samuel to be the new king of Israel, what was he doing when his father came and got him? Shepherding his father’s flocks.

Sheep, the most frequently mentioned animal in the Bible, represent us. We know our shepherd’s voice, and should listen to and follow Him. Looking at the characteristics of sheep, they often lack a sense of direction, tend to wander off, and are forever getting lost. Their lack of focus is a great source of concern for the shepherd because they allow the herd to go on without them while they dally along.

The prophet Isaiah noted that we humans also have tendency to wander from God like wayward sheep (Isa. 53:6).

Stray sheep need to be back with the flock. That’s what Jesus, our Good Shepherd, does for us, often times when we need Him most. He comes looking for us, scoops us up in His arms, and carries us back to His flock where we belong. A sheep’s best defense is to stay close to the shepherd and remain with the herd. The same is true with us, isn’t it? When we’re out of fellowship with God and isolated from other Christians, we’re most vulnerable. We need the Shepherd’s wisdom and strength to survive, as well as the comfort and encouragement of our sisters in Christ

A shepherd is the perfect metaphor for Cumberland Presbyterian Women’s Ministry because shepherding involves both leadership and caring. Just as God appointed David

– a shepherd who was not in it for himself, but for the welfare of the whole flock. This is the way God is with us. Ladies, I firmly believe that is what God calls us to be, good shepherds keeping watch over the flock. Jesus calls us to “feed my sheep.” This means literally, to shepherd (or tend) my sheep. We are Cumberland Presbyterian Women’s Ministry called to shepherd the flock entrusted to our care.

Leadership – We are creatures of habit much like sheep. We tend to follow the same paths and graze in the same fields. David the shepherd knew that if the flock was going to flourish the sheep had to be constantly under his leadership and guidance. One of the greatest single safeguards we have in handling the flock is to keep them on the move. In a word – there must be a predetermined plan of action, a deliberate, planned rotation from one grazing ground to another in line with right principles. Cumberland Presbyterian Women’s Ministry offers that plan through our commitment to be responsible to the whole mission of the church. To provide women the opportunities to share their gifts, interests, and talents and give them a connection to the church-at-large as well as women across the nation.

I believe we must serve with passion. Instead of loving ourselves more, we should practice loving Christ first and others more than ourselves. As with David, we are to serve with integrity of the heart.

Caring – One of the outstanding marks of a Christian should be a serene sense of gentle contentment. When we read the life story of Jesus Christ and examine carefully His conduct in coping with man’s need, I see Him again and again as the Good Shepherd picking up the “cast sheep”. In caring for his sheep, the good shepherd, the careful manager, will from time to time make a careful examination of each individual sheep. This picture is a very poignant one. Tending the sheep, feeding the sheep, tending the flock.

I have visited and shared with many groups over this past year my thoughts and concerns for the future of Women’s Ministry. I have always been personally involved in an organized missions program of some type or women’s work. It never occurred to me that at some point there would not be women eagerly willing to step up and fill positions of leadership in our organization. Being part of Cumberland Presbyterian Women’s Ministry and its accomplishments and involvement reaches beyond what I can express adequately. While serving on the Task Force a few years ago, I was made aware of the decline in the numbers of women involved in organized women’s ministry groups and Regions, especially those under the age of 40. Since I now fall into the almost retirement age category, my sense of urgency to nurture the flock becomes more apparent. My challenge to all women in our denomination is to look back, search your memory and recall someone who was a shepherd to you, someone who introduced you to Women’s Ministry through their service and commitment.

In pondering my thoughts for this message I could not help but think of my own experiences and those who had been good shepherds to me during my lifetime. I remember the shepherd who came to our home and showed me the art of cutting up and cooking a chicken. Now this may seem to be a strange statement to you, but to me it was someone who was sharing her gift of love and attention. You see at the time my mother was in the hospital, and I being the oldest girl was given the task of cooking dinner, which I had little experience in the art of cooking. I remember so vividly that she was one of the women from the Ladies Auxiliary. Remember them? I also recall those

youth leaders, my role models who taught me the principles of caring and giving to others, to help those who were outcasts and less fortunate than I. I remember visiting homes where an entire family was living in one room with wood heat and a hot plate for cooking. An impression forever etched in my young mind.

We have so many good models around us in our churches: amazing teachers and community leaders, mothers and fathers, grandparents and business men and women who are good shepherds. Why are they good models? Because they are not in it for personal gain. They do what is good for the whole, and with particular attention to those who are weak, the "have-nots."

As we stand before the Good Shepherd today, what really matters is how we are shepherding others. Not our money, our homes, our degrees, our looks, our longevity, our popularity, or our prestige. But how you shepherd your flock? Do you care for the least of these my sisters?

Isn't it wonderful when we become children of God, He engraves His name on our lives and we bear his name to the world? He reaches down and by His spirit says "that one is mine." Psalm 95 says, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the Lord our God our Maker, For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand." As the flock of God, we are to listen to the tender voice of God when we stray. I can not help but wonder how the Good Shepherd feels when he hears the sweet sound of his own from afar. It is probably like a "melody" in His ear. My hope is that each woman throughout our denomination this coming year will glorify the Lamb as we seek to fulfill the call as shepherds of God's flock by following the example of the Good Shepherd as we nurture, encourage and challenge those in our care and beyond.

I have so many people to thank for this wonderful journey I have traveled this past year. For the special memories, the warm hospitality from ladies at retreats, regional meetings, and in the local groups. Especially I shall not forget the wonderful time spent at our beloved Cumberland Presbyterian Children's Home. If I live to be 100 I will always have a smile on my face whenever I speak of "the year I was Convention President".

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