

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, April 21, 2024
"The Shepherd of Our Souls"

Young at Heart Message

In 1992, a movie with the following brief description, as quoted from IMDB (Internet Movie Database), was released:

"When a nightclub singer is forced to take refuge from the mob in a convent, she ends up turning the convent choir into a soulful chorus complete with a Motown repertoire, until the sudden celebrity of the choir jeopardizes her identity."

Does anyone know what movie this was?

The movie was *Sister Act*.

And yes, for those doing the math, it was released over 30 years ago.

Of course the movie was released for entertainment purposes, and probably doesn't actually offer much in terms of true theological conversation.

But, at the same time, often movies, books, and other forms of entertainment can be a great launching point for theological or spiritual discussions.

So, insofar as it might relate to today's scripture, I want to share a short clip from *Sister Act* with you all today.

Feel free to clap along or sing along if you feel so inspired. 😊

<https://youtu.be/ctjG4MjJwEA?si=rOhtO9keLVS45roS>

What did you all notice in this clip? I have several observations but I'm curious if any of you noticed anything...

...

Here's my list, and admittedly we could talk about any of these things as their own sermon:

1. They tap into the individual skills and talents of these choir members, and lift one another up. They're not in competition with each other, but they're proud of each other when they do something they've never done before.

2. The demographics of the people sitting in the pews do not in any way match the demographics of the neighbourhood outside of the church.
3. When people start coming in off the street, the priest kindly waves them in as a form of welcome. I'm not sure the abbess, had she been looking, would have done the same.

There is probably much more we could say about this if we really dove in.

But today, I want to focus on this "shepherding" the priest does of these people walking in off the street, and in particular, this notion that there is another flock just outside the doors of the church that are needing someone to meet them where they're at.

The Message

So, why bring Sister Act into this sermon at all?

Well, today's scripture passages, and indeed the theme of every Fourth Sunday of Easter in the Revised Common Lectionary, are about Christ as the Good Shepherd.

And admittedly, it can be difficult for people to truly understand what it means to be a flock shepherd when we are so far removed from a world in which shepherds are required in the way people understood them in that time period.

Today's scripture tells us, among other things, that Jesus has "other sheep that are not in this sheep pen." He says, "I must also bring them together, when they hear my voice. Then there will be one flock of sheep and one shepherd."

This resonated with me, and it's why I thought of Sister Act as an example of this.

The church in Sister Act is half empty, first of all.

But, more to the point, the people who are in attendance appear to be mostly older adults, and when the scene cuts to the street outside of the church, the people inside do not at all match the demographics of those outside the church.

In other words, that priest is preaching to only a small flock, and there are sheep outside of the walls of the church that are not in that metaphorical pen.

It wasn't until Whoopi Goldberg's character came into the church – someone who came from a world more like the one outside the church than inside – that this sleepy church started to shepherd to those quite literally just outside the door.

So, when Jesus says he has other sheep not inside the pen, it's possible that this is what he means.

Certainly in his context, he's talking about gentiles in particular - those who are not Jewish.

In today's context, in order for us to keep up with the new people Jesus aims to bring in, we have to learn to inhabit different cultures and look at Christ in new ways.

Often the people who don't belong to our own fold and hear Jesus' voice in unfamiliar ways are the ones best able to help us hear it and understand it differently.

I think we see this within our own community, but we also see it in the world around us.

It requires us to open our minds and our hearts to others who may see the world differently.

In conversation with many of you, and with so many others who have a deep faith, I've discovered that a concern that many people of faith have is a concern for others – in particular their children or grandchildren – who do not appear to have the same beliefs or the same deep faith.

But often I wonder if faith just looks different for different people?

If Jesus sees and knows that there are people outside of the pen that he is called to shepherd to, I wonder if the same is true for us?

He doesn't seem to indicate in any way that those outside of the pen are doomed or lost causes.

Instead, he seems to embrace them, love them, and shepherd to them by meeting them where they are - outside of the pen.

He does say he must bring them together, but he doesn't say he would do that by necessarily bringing them *into* the pen.

Perhaps he'd do that by bringing those in the pen to those outside the pen?

If you watch the whole movie, the nuns in Sister Act actually do start getting outside of their church walls and ministering to those who live in the neighbourhood around the church.

The requirement isn't that people must come inside in order to hear God's message.

Instead, they go out and meet the people where they are – they serve the needs of the community, rather than expecting those in the community to come to them.

And that's a huge shift for this little convent.

But it makes an even bigger difference to those outside of the church.

If we truly believe that Jesus works in us, through us, and around us, then we also have to accept that is true for other people too.

Jesus may be working in other people in ways that look very different than the ways Jesus works in us.

And that's because Jesus meets people where they are – whether that's in the church or outside of it.

Jesus goes to his flock. He seeks people out – even those who are in the depths of despair or hopelessness, or those who seem lost or unsure.

And this should bring us comfort.

Just because we find a connection with Jesus through a faithful church experience does not mean that is where Jesus meets everyone else.

Jesus meets us *all* where we're at.

And, we are called to meet others where they are at, too. We are called to love and serve God, and we can do that by loving and serving others.

So, may we learn to meet others where they are at on their faith journeys, wherever that may be.

May we expand our hearts and our ideas of faith and service to others to include those outside the pen.

May we seek out those who are different from us with inquisitive hearts and minds, exploring with curiosity and genuine care the ways in which Jesus shows up in the lives of others, and may we do all of that without judgement. Amen.

Let us pray:

Merciful God, who is more than we can ever imagine, give us a wider vision of the world; give us a broader view of justice; give us dreams of peace that are not defined by boundaries of geography or race or religion, or by the limitations of worldly structures and systems.

Open our eyes and our ears that wherever we go, we may hear your voice calling us by name; calling us to serve, calling us to share, calling us to praise, so that we never give up on the promise of your kingdom, where the world is transformed, and all can enjoy life in all its fullness. Amen.

~ Prayer posted on the Monthly Prayers page of the Christian Aid website. <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>