

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, "Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near."

'Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.'

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

Sermon: Did He Say Wolves?

On our recent trip we spent four days on Clare Island, just off Ireland's west coast – the island where my father's grandmother Ann Grady and possibly his grandfather John Moran were born. There were only 150 people living on the island and Moran and Grady were still common names there. It may not have been true, but I felt like I recognized the people there, that I was looking at my own family and seeing my own reflection in their faces.

I don't know how much life on the island resembles what it would have been a couple of generations ago. It has been somewhat sheltered and isolated – electricity first arrived in 1983. There was quite a fishing industry on the island, but that is now almost totally gone. They are just starting to raise salmon in fish farms, but nothing on the scale of what used to be.

The steep and rocky green hills dotted with sheep probably haven't changed much in the past century. I would guess that 90% of the residents raise sheep, and a large portion of the island is common grazing land. There were sheep dogs in every front yard, and if you walked by they'd join you for a spell before returning home.

We stayed with Oliver and Mary O'Malley, who run a Bed and Breakfast along with their sheep farm. When I asked Mary if there were any predators – wolves, bears, foxes,

bobcats, coyotes, - left on the island, she gave me kind of a wry smile almost as if she'd driven them off with her own bare hands and said simply, "no."

So these were very well tended and very safe sheep – safe up to a point I guess, considering we had an excellent meal of roast lamb, broccoli, mashed potatoes and mint jelly our last night there. If I'd given it more thought I might have realized that every time I looked in the mirror I saw the only predator of sheep still around.

The tending of sheep is so ancient in the bible that it shows up in the first generation born: Of the sons of Adam and Eve the Bible says Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground.

Like Clare Island, sheep are everywhere in the Bible, roaming through every aspect of life from food, clothing, and shelter, into the religious rituals and further into the symbolism that was used to describe family, political, and spiritual life.

The Bible describes sheep as affectionate, unaggressive, relatively defenseless, and in constant need of care and supervision. Given the nature of the landscape and the threat of predators, the sheep depended upon the shepherd for their protection and well being. This, as we know, became a core element of understanding of God. As we sang this morning: The Lord's my shepherd; I'll not want. God makes me down to lie in pasture green, and leadeth me, the quiet waters by.

One of the great rants against the economic and political leadership of the time was from the prophet Ezekiel, who speaks against the rulers and says:
Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.

From such observations comes the figure of God as the shepherd who acts to bring justice and redeem the world,

See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:10-11)

And this same language is found on the lips of Jesus, who says:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:11-15)

So all this is very consistent, very comprehensible, very comforting. So why, might I ask, did I hear the Lord say this morning: I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.

Did he say wolves??? This doesn't sound like what I signed up for. As a sheep, I signed up for divine protection – green pastures, still waters, that kind of thing. So why this sudden talk of life among wolves???

It's not in the Gospel lesson we read this morning from Luke, but Matthew tells a similar tale and adds one more touch that might help us understand what Jesus is driving at.

According to Matthew, Jesus says:

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. (Matthew 10:16)

Dr. Martin Luther King took this as a text for one of his often published sermons, a sermon he entitled: A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart. King, as we know, did not see Christianity as a lifeboat faith. By lifeboat faith I mean the kind of religion that sees the world sinking but asserts that God has chosen our little group to be the people who escape in the lifeboats – or in the underground bunker, the spaceship, the rapture or whatever means and mechanism the mind can imagine.

No, King saw Christianity as a faith of engagement – of getting down below the waterline in the sinking ship and trying to plug the holes and get the boat back on course. King didn't want to escape the world, but to redeem it. So the sending of the Christian into the world of wolves was not inconsistent with the care and comfort of the Good Shepherd – it was the commissioning of the disciple to take up the cross and follow in the footsteps of the Lord.

But, King said, to do this you must hold two opposite characteristics together in your personality – the tough mind and the tender heart. The tough mind is known by incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgment. But without a tender heart the tough mind is cold and detached, isolated without the capacity for genuine compassion.

To be tough minded without a tender heart is to be passionless, mean, and selfish. To be tenderhearted without a tough mind is to be sentimental, weak, and aimless.

And, King concludes, we see these characteristics in a God who expresses tough mindedness in the demand for justice, and tenderheartedness in love and grace.

So, Jesus did say wolves, and he added that to survive among them we must be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves, or we must work to cultivate a tough mind and a tender heart.

But what about these wolves? Are we to adopt a world view that sees “them” as the wolves and “us” as the sheep?. Are there no wolves here this morning? Is our church an island set off from the mainland free of predators ?

I think back to my asking Mary O'Malley about predators and then eating a meal of roast lamb that very night. It was Walt Kelly, making a poster for Earth Day in 1970, who turned an old military quote inside out and had his character Pogo say: We have met the enemy, and he is us. Maybe we've met the wolf as well.

Sometimes, to feel safe, there is the temptation to let our inner wolf loose – to think we need to be a wolf among wolves lest we be devoured. But the Good Shepherd assures us that this is not our path – I send you out as a lamb among wolves – as disciples with a hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness, but with a word of peace on your lips. And, to skip to the end of our scripture lesson, do not worry if you cannot immediately see the rewards of your labors, only rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

And please pass the mint jelly.