

"God of the Bullied"

Rev. Peter Bynum
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¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

²⁰Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²²I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.

²³I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. (Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24)

As one of the exilic prophets, Ezekiel brought the Word of the Lord to vast numbers of bullied people. He was among the unfortunate souls who were carried off into exile by the Babylonians, who brought Jerusalem to its knees with an 18-month siege that began in 587 BCE. In the end, the starving occupants of Jerusalem were forced to watch as their conquerors executed the king's sons and then violently blinded the king himself. It was a common punishment for rebellious slaves, which is exactly how the Israelites were viewed. Thousands of humiliated residents were then deported back to Babylon. The book of Lamentations, written in the midst of this devastation, thus begins: *"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!"* (Lam. 1:1).

Perhaps then it is no wonder that the Word that God gives to Ezekiel to offer to these bullied masses is a word of comfort and presence. God knows that the people have been roughed up and scattered. God hears the cries of the sheep who are hungry, those who have been pushed around by the flanks and shoulders of fatter, stronger, greedy, and thoughtless sheep. Ezekiel brings comfort to the bullied — reassurance that God is squarely on the side of the poor, the weak, and the marginalized. *"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,"* God says, *"and I will make them lie down... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak... I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged."*

At the same time, Ezekiel also brings a Word warning to the bullies — the leaders, movers and shakers who are grabbing too much for themselves, those who gobble up more than their fair share, those who make themselves fat at the expense of the weaker sheep. *"[T]he fat and the strong I will destroy,"* says the Lord. *"Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide... I will judge between*

sheep and sheep.” Ezekiel leaves it unclear whether these kinds of bullies actually have a place in God’s flock at all.

Growing up in Greensboro I remember one bully who was at his worst when it snowed. The best sledding hill in our neighborhood was at the junior high school and all the kids went there. One boy, who was older and bigger, would pick on the smaller kids. It was clear he wanted to dominate the hill. He was not interested in sharing it. He didn’t want to wait for his turn. He wanted to control the whole thing. Through rough and tumble experience, the younger kids learned to keep our distance. Sometimes we even left when he showed up. It just wasn’t fun when the bully was around.

Today, bullies have new and more powerful weapons at their disposal. Now, in addition to all the traditional up-close and personal ways that a kid can get bullied, victims must also contend with attacks online through social media. The combined effect can be overwhelming to a young person. It is estimated that every day 160,000 children stay home from school because they are afraid of being bullied. Ninety percent (90%) of all 4th through 8th graders report that they have been victims of bullying. Seventy-one (71%) of students say that bullying is a problem at their school, and about the same number – sixty-seven percent (67%) — believe that their schools respond very poorly and inadequately to bullying.¹

Even now, as adults, many of us still carry scars from encounters with bullies. In your lifetime, has a bully ever made you cry? Has a bully ever embarrassed you in front of others? Has a bully ever excluded you from a group? Has a bully ever made you feel weak or powerless?² Because most of us have had experiences like this at one time or another, God’s promise to be a shepherd who defends and cares for us is a deeply comforting and reassuring word. Our God is on a mission to help the weaker sheep, the bullied sheep, and the poorer lambs who are getting pushed around by those with more power. Our God is on a mission to seek out the lost and bring them safely home. Our God is on a mission to find the ones who are not getting their fair share of the things they need and to feed them, clothe them, bind up their wounds, and make them know that they are loved. Our God is the God of the Bullied.

As Christians, we see God’s identity as the compassionate shepherd take on even greater meaning when the son of the shepherd himself becomes a victim of cruel bullying. As Jesus suffers insults and abuse at the hands of Roman and Jewish authorities, the Good Shepherd of John’s gospel becomes the Suffering Servant of Isaiah’s scroll. He “*was despised and rejected by others; a man of sorrows acquainted with grief... one from whom others hide their faces... [one who] was despised and held of no account...*” “*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,*” Isaiah says, “*nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*” And yet he is the One who will rise up and come to our rescue. He is the One who will bear our infirmities and carry our diseases. We do not treat him as he deserves, because we like sheep have gone astray (Isaiah 53:1-7). But he will put himself willingly into the hands of bullies for our sake, for the Good Shepherd gladly lays down his life for his sheep.

Writing as an African-American theologian, James Cone sees this as the defining characteristic of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Jesus comes to us as “the Oppressed One whose earthly existence was bound up with the oppressed of the land.”³ Christ’s existence, he says, “is one with the poor and outcasts.”⁴ This is the presence promised in the Psalms which tell us that the Lord “*will be a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble*” (Psalm 9:9)...

¹ <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-bullying>

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nakedpastor/2013/04/is-god-a-great-big-bully/#QXxoCMgFYduYxWKe.99>

³ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), 113.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

that God is the father of orphans and the protector of widows... that “*God gives the desolate a home to live in*” and “*leads out the prisoners to prosperity...*” that God restores the heritage of his people when it languishes and gives the needy of his flock a safe dwelling place (Psalm 68). As James Cone puts it, Jesus “must be where human beings are enslaved.”⁵ Wherever people are suffering or being abused, Christ the Good Shepherd will be there... in fact, he **must** be there.

That means we must be there, too. As worshipers of the God of the Bullied, as followers of the Good Shepherd who himself was bullied, we are called to be especially sensitive to situations in which weak or vulnerable people are being abused or mistreated. Ezekiel says that the Good Shepherd will “feed his sheep with justice.” This is the true nourishment of the faithful. This is the food that satisfies not just for a moment, but for a lifetime. As those who follow the Good Shepherd, as those who listen to and heed his voice, the pursuit of justice for all of God’s people – including the poorest, weakest and sickest among us — is to be our daily bread.

We are also called to be honest with ourselves about ways that we might be supporting or contributing to systems that fatten the strong at the expense of the weak. This is not just a question of how we make decisions as a church; it is a question of how we make decisions in every aspect of our lives. As people of God and people of the world, what are we accepting... what are we supporting... what are we tolerating in the name of power, influence or comfort that may be causing harm to poor, vulnerable or marginalized people? As Dr. Carolyn Sharp of Yale Divinity School has written, “it is never God’s will that believers injure one another, jockey for advantage, or exploit resources that should be for all.”⁶ Because the Good Shepherd will always be with those who are enslaved, because he will always seek out the suffering ones so that wherever they are he will be also, we are called to be there, too, so that we might give voice to the voiceless and lend power to those who are bullied by power.

One man who was trying to follow that path was walking home one night when he was attacked out of nowhere by a gang of muggers. After beating the man severely, the thugs dragged him into a dark alley and left him there for dead. As he lay bleeding on the ground, he felt someone gently lifting his shoulders off the pavement. Straining to open his eyes, he could only see the fuzzy outline of a man’s face framed by the soft yellow glow of a distant streetlight. Almost immediately, he lost consciousness once more. But later, in the hospital, this vague memory came back to him. He asked his nurse, “Is the one who helped me here? I want to speak to him.”

“Yes,” she answered, “He is here and has been waiting to see you.”

When the Good Samaritan walked into the hospital room, the injured man gratefully shook his hand. “I want to thank you for helping me tonight,” he said. “And I want to tell you something. When I looked up into that dim light and saw your face, I thought you were Jesus.”

The man smiled back at him. “I have something to tell you, too,” he said. “When I heard your voice calling for help, I thought **you** were Jesus.”⁷

Where people are suffering in pain, Jesus is there. Where people are struggling under the weight of poverty, Jesus is there. Where weak people are oppressed by systems that unfairly favor the strong, Jesus is there. If we seek to follow the Good Shepherd who looks out for the bullied ones wherever they may be, then we need to be there, too.

May God guide us to those places with the sound of the shepherd’s voice. **Amen.**

⁵ Ibid., 121.

⁶ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=199

⁷ Robert F. Sims, “Under the Wings of the Almighty,” <https://www.sermonsuite.com/free-access/shepherd-king>