

the Rev. Dr. Paul Tellström
Easter 4C

Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC
April 25, 2010

Psalm: 23

word count: 2,670

Gospel Reading: *Luke 17:1-14* "Bad Shepherd Sunday: A Crisis in the Church."

The fourth Sunday after Easter is referred to as "Good Shepherd Sunday." On this day, the scriptures that point to Jesus as the good shepherd are called upon. Often, the 23rd psalm is recited. Today's lesson would have been from the Gospel of John, where Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

The idea of being followers of Jesus appeals to people in various ways. I think that for many clergy, this means trying, as best as one can, to model what it means to be such a follower. The term, "flock," is often applied to a congregation, and the shepherd is the person in whom the church has presumably placed their confidence in order to find a safe space in which to know that we are loved by God and how to love each other in return. A colleague of mine is an Episcopal Bishop, and I notice that he carries (ceremoniously) a fine gilded crosier—a tall, curved staff that is meant to represent a shepherd's crook.

People who come to a church wanting to find ways of modeling a Christian life have every reason to expect that the clergy person, however full of human faults he or she might be, has been working throughout a long calling to try to model what it means to be a follower of Jesus. I will say that falling short of that goal (in whatever way) in front of you every day is humbling to say the least.

Our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church are in the midst of a terrible and extremely long scandal involving not only sexual abuse of minors as well as adults, but a subsequent cover-up of these events that travels all the way to the Pope.

I have never addressed this here with you for the reason that most of us don't want to talk about it. We don't want to say things that appear to judge. We have friends who are Catholic, and the Catholic Church is our sister with whom we don't always agree, but is a welcome part of the family nevertheless. Our goal as a family is to always work for open communication and to stress what we have in common rather than our differences.

Also, we see our "shadow selves" in family members—"If that is true about her, and we are from the same family, could it also be true about us as well?" And of course, the answer is "yes". Abuses of power exist wherever power has been vested, and churches of all kinds have not managed to escape clergy abuse. And, it might be noted that clergy of all kinds have been the victims of abuse from sick family systems within churches as well.

When the story first began to break a decade ago, a priest I knew remarked bitterly that when it came to reporting news about the Catholic Church, the coverage was always only bad.

As he rightly pointed out, there are tremendous works being done every day through Catholic charities, hospitals, schools, and community-based programs designed to alleviate the suffering of the poor at home, as well as the relief work that is carried out the world over. Why, he asks, are these things never written about?

And, as I have learned, there is an aspect of the story that smacks of Arthur Miller's "The Crucible". No one is safe. Anyone can be labeled a witch. A man I believed to be a priest of great integrity was snatched from his parish and has disappeared while an allegation going back 25-30 years was investigated. No matter what happens to him now, the scarlet letter has been hung around his neck.

Still, the most disturbing thing is the story itself that continues to unfold, and how it affects us, and most of all, the victims of abuse.

That priests with a history of sexual abuse would not be censured, but would instead be re-assigned to other unsuspecting parishes to pick up where they left off, shows a hierarchical structure clearly more interested in protecting itself than the adherents whose spiritual charge has been placed in its care.

When the story first broke, Bishop Wilton Gregory, quoted in Newsweek, immediately found a scapegoat. He said, "This is an ongoing struggle. It is most importantly a struggle to make sure that the Catholic priesthood is not dominated by homosexual men."¹ Just last week, the Vatican's second in command, Cardinal Tarciso Bertone echoed that sentiment, blaming the Catholic church's inability to provide a safe atmosphere for their children on a connection between homosexuality and pedophilia.² While continuing to assign a scapegoat, leaders all the way up to the Vatican have been discovered to have hushed the real problem.

Former President of the Chicago Theological Seminary, Susan Thistlethwaite, responds differently.

"In discussing pedophilia and the priesthood, there has been a tendency to link this psychiatric disorder with celibacy and homosexuality. As the Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team of the United Church of Christ has pointed out, this is misguided. Pedophilia occurs among persons without regard to their marital status or gender identity. Many denominations, including the UCC, have married and partnered clergy; as well as gay and lesbian clergy."³

Abuse of power is what comes through most strongly in this unfolding story. And this abuse of power goes back through many centuries of the church's history. Dow Edgerton, Academic Dean of the Chicago Theological Seminary, writes:

"Reformers (of the church) found significant fault with much of the practice that they received, but the practices had already been the subject of vigorous debate since at least the twelfth or thirteenth century. Long before the Reformation, abuse of the confessional was a source of profound scandal in the church. Then, as now, there were clergy who used the prerogatives of their holy office to abuse those entrusted to them, using their knowledge of the sin and suffering of their people to enhance their own power. Extortion, seduction, sexual violation – all protected by (and sometimes committed under) the seal of the confessional – were recognized as terrible realities in the church's life. Confidentiality and sacramental power, originally seen as ways of encouraging repentance and transformation became, in the hands of abusers, a means of holding the vulnerable in bondage and maintaining the very sin that it was designed to transform. As with virtually every question of importance, the history of the discussion is complex and various. And as with so many questions of importance, the issues we face now have faced Christians before."⁴

As a member of a UCC church, I want us to know what safeguards are in place in our own churches that would stand to protect our church members, children and our clergy from abuse.

I am sorry that I could not write a sermon for today that is uplifting, or one that attempts to shed more light on the scripture for the day. Instead, I read one too many articles on this never-ending scandal, knowing that you have all been reading them as well. It frustrates me no end to know that not only were such things repeatedly allowed to happen on such a widespread scale with the presumed knowledge of the church hierarchy, but that their instinct was to protect the institution instead of the people whose care was entrusted to them. Bad shepherds, indeed.

As people cross denominational lines and theological borders more and more in their quest to find a spiritual home, it is clear to me that we need to be able to say where we stand, and what safeguards are in place. As a church where the congregation actively works with the pastor in

providing leadership, I welcome ways in which we can work together to know that we are indeed, providing a safe place for all of us. We have a healthy community, and I know it is important to all of us that it remains that way.

First, with regard to the confessional nature of our faith—we don't have one. I came into the ministry believing that I had the same rights as the Catholic priest down the street to hold confidences intact at all costs. And, the Ordained Minister's Code, from the *United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry*, does state, "I will honor all confidences shared with me."

However, the law interprets my right to hold a confidence differently from the Catholic Church. Since theirs is a "confessional" practice of religion, the priest may protect the information that is shared with him. It is my understanding that this belief has been extended to priests who confess matters of sexual abuse, and that this idea of being protected from the laws that govern the rest of us is what has caused so much secrecy and confusion on the part of Cardinals about releasing this information.

Ours is not a confessional faith. Confessing sins to a minister and receiving absolution does not exist as part of our religious belief. Therefore, apart from the statement "I will honor all confidences shared with me," I must also act within the law. If you came to me to tell me that you had, for example, committed a murder or abused your spouse or child, by law, I would have to report it.

With regard to sexual abuse, your denomination is very clear. I want to read to you our definition of sexual misconduct:

"Sexual misconduct is an abuse of the ministerial office by means of sexual behavior toward one with whom one is in a ministerial relationship. Sexual misconduct includes, but is not limited to, the development or the attempt to develop a sexual relationship between a person with standing or recognition as a minister and someone with whom she or he has a ministerial relationship, *whether or not there is apparent consent from the individual*. All sexual activity between adults and minors (or other persons incapable of making adult decisions) is sexual misconduct."⁵

Our churches are divided into "associations." Ours is the Southern Association of the Southern California Nevada Conference. The office is located near San Diego. Our churches covenant with each other to keep ourselves accountable to the highest standards of conduct.

I would like you to know what this means, because it directly deals with clergy abuse, as well as abuse of clergy by congregations.

Our ministers and our congregations have recourse when abuse occurs.

We are self-governing bodies, and we nominate a mixture of laity and clergy, men and women, diverse in culture, race and sexual orientation, to serve on committees that provide support to our churches and ministers. There is a committee on Church & Ministry that works to make sure that clergy coming into our churches are healthy and well-educated leaders, and they recommend them for ordination or standing. Elizabeth comes to us most recently through that committee.

There is a second committee on Church & Ministry that works with clergy and with churches that have problems. There is a manual on sexual misconduct that helps this committee to understand how to respond. There is a support system for both sides that is set up, which acts even after the final process of exoneration or disciplinary action that can result in termination of ministry.

Every four years, I must complete boundary training, to show that I have healthy boundaries with my congregation. All clergy must do this.

Our clergy share tips with each other on safeguarding themselves and their churches. For example, my office door is open unless you tell me that you want to shut it, and then my window coverings are opened.

As difficult as it seems, secrets like sexual abuse cannot exist and must be opened up and examined, and if at all possible, healing must take place, in whatever institution they occur, Catholic or Protestant, Jewish or Muslim, sacred or secular.

Dr. Avis Clenendon, Professor of Moral Theology Catholic Theological Union, believes that this will be true for her Catholic Church as well. She says:

“It’s hard to be one of the nation’s 61 million Roman Catholics as the whole world watches the proverbial elephant in the living room finally being noticed and named. It’s hard because it is just so horrible, heart wrenching, and enraging on multiple levels. It is also a relief. I am speaking of that kind of relief a family feels when together they finally confront the dysfunction that is destroying them from within; when they tell the truth and break the stranglehold of the secret. It is our secrets that make us sick.”⁶

Those who are involved in such abuses of power must be held up for healing. “Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of the effects of pastoral misconduct may be felt in a congregation decades or even generations after the fact. Some studies liken pastoral misconduct to incest in its capacity for long-term harm and residual wounds, often hidden by those who experience victimization. Likewise, if allegations are made which are not substantiated, resentment and alienation on the part of the accused, his or her family, and the church may persist for many years.”⁷

While I agree that it is good to finally name the elephant that is in the living room, this particular elephant has continued to maraud the room for over a decade, and it is time for the authorities to stop it from fondling the peanuts.

A reporter covering the current scandal asked a middle aged man who had been abused if it really affected him today. She watched him as the tears of shame came to his face, and knew before he answered. I know how this can be true. I went to summer camp in upstate New York when I was nine. I made best friends with a boy named Jon. It soon became clear that our cabin counselor wanted to humiliate him in front of the other boys. I became protective. I won’t give you any details, but it was soon clear that something very untoward had developed in their relationship. Jon kept “secrets” about it because he was told to, but there were tears that I couldn’t help make better. Years later as I fully understand it, I can only think that somewhere, there is a 55 year old man who lives with the same residual shame of sexual abuse, and my inability to help him 46 years ago has surely colored the visceral feelings I have about this issue today. It is hard for me not to be judgmental. I am sure that it is hard for you as well when it comes to the protection of children.

This is a difficult time for church communities all around the world.

Dr. Jaime Romo is a victim of childhood abuse who today runs workshops locally to help educate churches so that they can declare themselves to be, “Safe Churches.”

He says, “I’ll tell you a secret. If we want to be trusted, we need to be clear about our boundaries, roles and authority. If we want people to believe in us, then we have to take an active role to prevent abuse and to create the kinds of environments where people are safe and healthy.”⁸

We say, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” I think it is safe to say that this is a place where God has placed a period.

Jesus said, “It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.”

Let us be good shepherds, all of us, to each other and especially to the children in our midst. And part of being strong shepherds means making sure that those who trust in us, especially the youngest amongst us, are safe, valued and healthy. I am committed to that goal, and I know you are as well. Let the whole church say, “AMEN.”

Sermon Resources:

- 1) Jon Meacham, *A Case for Change*, Newsweek, May 6, 2002
- 2) Michael Sheridan, New York Daily News, April 13, 2010
- 3) Susan Thistlethwaite, *In Such a Time as This*, Chicago Theological Seminary, May 2002
- 4) Dr. Dow Edgerton, “What We Teach at CTS” from *In Such a Time as This*, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, May, 2002
- 5) Southern California/Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, guidelines.
- 6) Dr. Avis Clenendon, Professor of Moral Theology Catholic Theological Union, “Reflections from a Catholic Moral Theologian, from *In Such a Time as This*, Chicago, May 2002
- 7) Author unknown, SCNCUCC Guidelines on Sexual Misconduct.
- 8) Jaime Romo, transcribed from video at www.jaimeromo.com

“in unison” Psalm 23 (King James Version)

1 The LORD is my shepherd ; I shall not want . 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies : thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Luke 17:1-14 (NRSV)

1 Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! 2 It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. 3 Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 4 And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, “I repent,” you must forgive.” 5 The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” 6 The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. 7 “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here at once and take your place at the table’? 8 Would you not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? 9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10 So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” 11 On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, 13 they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” 14 When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean.