

**Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Shepherd of Our Souls
John 10:14

As we move through the journeys of our lives there are times when we need a shepherd to help us find the right path. Some of you have heard Dale Rogers describe his journey to Westminster twenty years ago. It was Dale's father who told him about the opportunity here. When Dale delayed sending in his resumé it was his father who kept telling him, "Don't forget Westminster." Fortunately for us, Dale listened to a wise shepherd.

I was blessed with a shepherd last week on my journey to the Northern Neck of Virginia. I was following the footprints of my Huguenot ancestor, the Reverend Jean Bertrand. I had previously tracked Bertrand from the French village where he was born in 1653 to the sites in London where he was ordained in the Church of England, where he was married, and where he served in a temporary pastoral relationship. In Virginia I was hoping to find the place where Bertrand was buried in 1701.

Jean Bertrand purchased a 924-acre plantation on the Rappahannock River in 1692 and named it Belle Isle. He thought of it as an island because its boundaries were defined by a river, two creeks, and a swamp. Now more than 700 acres of that property are protected as a State Park bearing the name that Bertrand gave it. Bertrand is believed to be buried on the plantation but there is no marked gravesite. I checked out an old cemetery in the middle of a plowed field which has graves going back to 1790. These stones bore the names of the family which purchased the plantation from the great-grandson of Jean Bertrand. But there was no space there for his grave. Then I found two people who directed me to another place on the plantation. One of them was a ranger who had worked on this property as a farmhand years ago. He described a clump of trees that had been planted in an isolated location long ago. For three centuries farmers had plowed and planted around it. For some reason no one had ever attempted to clear this piece of ground. For as long as anyone could remember it had been called "the graveyard," though no gravestones were visible.

The ranger gave me directions for finding this spot from one of the hiking trails. I set out with great anticipation on what was supposed to be a mile and a half walk. When I reached the river I knew I had gone too far. I then made a large circle around the area where the site was supposed to be but still I could not identify it. After five miles of futile effort I arrived back at the trail head. Like a good shepherd the ranger was waiting to hear my report. This time he emphasized that the field that I was looking for could only be reached by taking a path through a swamp. I had missed the path. The ranger drew a more detailed map which took me to the right path. There I found an amazing place which can only be explained as the burial site of early plantation settlers.

Scripture uses the imagery of the shepherd to describe the kind of help that we all need from God. We find this imagery in the book of Ezekiel where the prophet grieves over the predicament of a people who are at the mercy of political leaders who are bad shepherds. These leaders trample the people in their quest for power and wealth. They feed themselves at the expense of the people. They

rule with force and harshness instead of kindness and mercy. The prophet yearns for the day when God will come as the good shepherd to right the wrongs and restore the people, and place them on the path which leads to life.

We also find this imagery beautifully expressed in the Psalms. There we read of the shepherd who provides comfort and safety, leading us to green pastures and still waters, and placing us on the paths of righteousness. In the gospel of John we read that Jesus is this good shepherd who meets our needs and directs us to the right path. This was a compelling image in the life of the early church. One experience I will never forget is a trip to Italy with Dale Rogers and members of our choir where we visited the catacombs in Rome. There we saw one of the earliest examples of Christian art. Jesus is depicted as an athletic young Roman man with a lamb draped across his shoulders. This was the good shepherd who early Christians trusted to lead them to the end of their journeys. This is the shepherd of our souls to whom we can turn in our most difficult and fearful moments.

Timothy Tyson tells of a fearful time in the life of a church in North Carolina which was caught in the struggle to end segregation in the 1960s. The pastor of this white congregation had invited the president of an historic black college to speak at the church. Lay leaders in the congregation were furious that they could not convince their pastor to withdraw the invitation. The night before the African American leader was to preach a meeting was held at the church to force the pastor's hand.

The mood was ugly when a 60 year old first grade teacher named Miss Amy limped her way to the front of the church to speak. She had taught many of the people in the room. She told them a story about a teenaged boy from another town in their state who had driven too fast around a curve and was killed when his car crashed. Or so they thought. The boy was lying in a ditch by the side of the road while people waited for an ambulance to take him to the funeral home. There was no sign of life. But then an airman from nearby Pope Air Force Base stopped. When he saw the boy lying there he scrambled down the embankment and opened the boy's mouth. He saw the tongue stuck in his throat. He opened the passageway and gave the boy mouth to mouth resuscitation. By the time the ambulance arrived the boy was up and walking around.

Then Miss Amy confessed to her listeners that there was another part of the story she had not shared. The boy who wrecked his car was white. The airman who saved his life was black. Then she said, "Now, which of you fathers would have said to the airman, 'Now don't run your black fingers down my boys white throat? Don't you put your black lips on my boy's mouth (Timothy B. Tyson, quoted in *Journal For Preachers*, Easter 2006, page 61)?" There was no response.

When Miss Amy addressed her angry audience that day she was speaking for the shepherd of our souls. She gave her people a map for leaving their fear behind and finding their way onto the path of righteousness. That is the path to which the Shepherd is leading us today. On this path we can pray for one another the prayer that we frequently use in funeral services here:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior,
 we commend your servant...
Acknowledge we humbly pray,
 a sheep of your own fold
 a lamb of your own flock
 a sinner of your own redeeming.

