

EMCC Oct. 20, 2019 – “Shepherds and Kings”

In our scripture David is crowned king of Israel by acclamation of the people. This is a big moment for David and important to our story of faith. To be sure we know how important David is to Jesus’ story, the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, Matthew 1, recites a 23-generation genealogy linking Jesus’ earthly family tree all the way back to King David, making a claim about Jesus’ royal lineage and legitimacy as our king. As a newly crowned king, David decrees that he and all the people shall praise God with song and dance. David liked to celebrate, let it all go. Since he was king, when he sang and danced everybody else had to join in too. Following the king’s lead was usually good for a person’s health and longevity.

All this song and dance, trumpets, drums, tambourines, lutes and cymbals sounds loud and ostentatious, more like a rock and roll show or Broadway musical than a sacred procession of praise. Does this sound like something we’d do in church? An African-American gospel musician once told me after singing and dancing his heart and soul out in a UCC worship service, “Wow! ...They almost clapped! ...Dynamite couldn’t get them out of their seats.”

We're the UCC, we like quiet, dignified celebrations; making a spectacle singing and dancing make us self-conscious: It's not really our thing. We're thoughtful, progressive, deep-thinking people. I appreciate that our choirs and Music Directors try to get us up: singing, making joyful noise, maybe swaying in place if we're feeling it and clapping lightly if we really want to let it all go.

Some churches have popes, archbishops or charismatic evangelical preachers, king-like figures who set the tone for their followers. The United Church of Christ has consciously distanced itself from an authoritarian approach, embracing independence and self-determination, both in faith and church polity. If right, we could compare UCC churches to tribes, we'd be the Edina Morningside tribe, our neighboring tribes would be the Linden Hills Mayflower UCC. Our land of Minnesota would be made up of 125 tribes.

In Second Samuel, the tribes of Israel proclaimed David king, their hero who rose up from a shepherd to slay a giant, lead his people to victory and drive away a foreign army. The tribes made him king to lead them, to have all the answers to their problems, to make Israel powerful and prosperous. And it became so – they got a king. But, they wanted something more from David, something bigger and higher. What could be

higher than a king? The tribes of Israel wanted to be more than their political, military and economic leader, they wanted him to be their spiritual leader, too so they asked him to be their shepherd. To ensure David knew which calling, king or shepherd, was most important to God, he was told “The Lord said to you David: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel.”

This calling to be the nation’s shepherd had to confuse David. He knew what it was like to be a shepherd, the lowest of the low in ancient Israel: poor, uneducated, no status or authority. He knew kings lived in palaces, wore robes and crowns, made all the decisions as the man in charge. Kings were absolute, divine rulers who demanded loyalty, ruled by decree and governed through power. How could David be a shepherd and a king simultaneously? The two roles seem as far apart as the sun and moon.

The king lives in a palace, surrounded by luxury and guards, ruling by edict and force. His followers do his bidding because he says so. A shepherd lives underneath God’s sky, in fields and forests, surrounded by creatures great and small. A shepherd can issue all the decrees he or she wants but the sheep won’t care. Sheep learn to trust shepherd and follow their guidance for food, water and protection. The shepherd can only invite

not command the sheep to follow. A shepherd doesn't harm, abuse or take advantage of the sheep, else the flock would be no more. A good shepherd sometimes leads the flock from the front, but frequently guides from the back, allowing the sheep to explore new paths. As a young man growing up on a cattle ranch in the 60's and 70's, I learned was best to let cattle find their own way when driving them from summer pastures in the mountains to winter fields close to the barn. A good cowboy is a lazy cowboy, riding quietly at the back, only exerting authority if a cow or calf decides to stray off. Shepherds - and cowboys – learn to lead by guidance and example, inviting the herd to follow them to green pastures and clear water.

Kings and shepherds. Kings and shepherds throughout the Bible. The Israelites wanted David to be both their shepherd **and** king. David, it turned out was a great king but seemed loose his knack as a shepherd and his people eventually lost their way. In the gospels, Jesus' followers and critics claimed he was the once and future king, hence the first chapter of Matthew. Many of his followers thought he was going to be their liberator king, just like David. His critics accused him of plotting insurrection as an upstart king, usurping their power and wealth. What did Jesus say? He used both terms, king and shepherd. In John 18 he told his followers about his kingdom, in John 10 he said he was the good shepherd who knew and

cared for all his sheep. Jesus was, and is, both king and shepherd. There are times and places for both images.

I asked earlier what could be higher than a king? A shepherd, I believe. This is counter-intuitive, but here is my reasoning. We think it would be wonderful to have a king or queen dispense justice, make tough but necessary decisions, settle disputes and ensure everyone's safety and security. It's quite understandable to want someone to solve the world's problems that besiege us every day. We hope Christ will be merciful and just king, bringing goodwill and peace on earth. However, what I believe we need, as followers of Christ, is a good shepherd to guide us, when times are hard sustain us, when we're wounded carry and care for us.

There are times and circumstances when we have to claim our authority and power, setting rules, arbitrating disputes and ensuring justice. That certainly was true for me while raising 5 teenagers. I believe it's also true for us as Christians when we are called to courageously lead. Today, however, I want to ask what if we embrace our role as shepherds, as individuals and as a church community? Allow me to explain. When we follow Jesus the good shepherd, we not only become members of his flock, his church, we become shepherds too. We shed our robes and crowns, our decrees and privilege. We put on the shepherd's tunic, take up the staff

and go out into the world to care for, love and guide our community by invitation, just as the good shepherd does for us.

Recently, we have been talking about what our church's vision and strategic direction means for us as members. What is our calling? We come here to be fed and nourished, to find shelter in the arms of the good shepherd who watches over us. As members of Edina Morningside we also embrace our call to be of service, seek justice, to love our neighbors as best we can. Do we invite them into our community?

Here at Edina Morningside we try to live by the motto "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." What if this was not an end, but a beginning? Anita Bradshaw, one of our Assoc. Conference Ministers wrote recently "What if we were as invitational as we are welcoming? People may want what we have to offer, but they don't know that we are there to offer it. Welcoming is good, but it is passive, it assumes people will come to us and seek us out." We could be bold shepherds, inviting our community and neighbors to join us in being shepherds too for this shepherd's tunic and staff are not, they're ours. Amen.

