

Modern Day Good Shepherds

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John 10:1-10

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“It’s another door. I just need to walk through it.” Was a repeated line I heard in a movie I saw the other night. This was a movie adaptation of the life of Temple Grandin who was born in 1947. The movie follows her early life into adulthood as she faced many obstacles in her life she struggled to overcome. Doctors said Temple would never talk and was presumed to have permanent brain damage, although she had no known head trauma. They encouraged her mother, Anna, to put Temple into an institution, which was a typical practice in the 1940s for people with such conditions. Temple’s mother decided otherwise and was convinced that with enough love and structured help Temple would be able to overcome her struggles. At age four Temple did begin to speak and with the help of her mother, speech therapists, and others Temple attended school, it was difficult but she was slowly learning. As Temple began High School her mother Anna came across a check list for autism and informally diagnosed Temple as autistic. This was later confirmed by doctors. This explained a lot for Temple and Anna, but for others this diagnosis blinded their ability to see her gifts and sharp intellect. Again people tried to push Temple into institutional life. Her mother continued to advocate for Temple’s right to an education and a life. The teasing and emotional setbacks such trauma brought continued.

That began to change when her new high school science teacher, Mr. Carlock took Temple under his wing. He realized that Temple learned in differently than most people. Temple learned through pictures and concrete images. Temple was just different, not less than anyone else. “Different not less” became a motto that Temple soon took on, whenever someone teased her or used her autism as a slur to cut her down. Mr. Carlock helped Temple see herself as just as smart and amazing as other “normal kids” building up her confidence to overcome other people’s inability to see her unique gifts.

He encouraged her to embrace her autism as just one part of who she was and as a gift, not a burden. She could pursue any dream she had. Knowing that Temple was a visual learner, he taught Temple to see new challenges as doors she needed to walk through onto a bigger and better way of being in the world. This helped her push through her internalized fears about new things as well.

Temple's experience on her aunt's cattle ranch helped develop her lifelong care for animals and her career in animal husbandry. She understood the similarities of the way she thinks and how animals think. She often advocated for more humane practices at stockyards stating, "I think using animals for food is an ethical thing to do, but we've got to do it right. We've got to give those animals a decent life and we've got to give them a painless death. We owe the animal respect." Her own experiences of human cruelty deepened her compassion for animals also, arguing "Nature is cruel, but we don't have to be. Animals make us human."

Today, Doctor Temple Grandin, now 76 years old, is an international expert in animal husbandry especially cattle and a professor at the University of Colorado. She has also become a world renown educator and speaker on Autism. In 2010 she was named one of the top 100 most influential and inspiring people in the world by Time Magazine.

Some people think that Temple is cured of Autism because of her many accomplishments. Temple staunchly denies this notion. When asked if she would want to be "normal", she said "If I could snap my fingers and be non-autistic, I would not. Autism is part of what I am."

Temple Grandin is a modern-day shepherd for us in many ways and I celebrate her unique understanding of animals and humans because of her neurodivergent lens on life. It has taken our society a long time to shift our thinking about autism and other neurodivergent ways of being in our world. It is still a growing edge of science and society to understand people as different but not less. We are all unique and gifted individuals in our own right and in my opinion, there is no such thing as normal.

This story of Temple Grandin gave me new insights into today's reading on the Good Shepherd. In today's reading Jesus describes himself as the gate keeper, the gate and even the good Shepherd for the flock. Jesus states at the end of the reading that true good shepherds come to give life and life more abundantly. The imposters, the deceivers are those who come to rob, kill, and destroy.

Temple had people in her life that were Good Shepherds. People who sought to lead her in the wider world, protect her from harm, and loved her as a precious lamb. They brought her into their flock to be part of the whole, instead of excluding her and forcing her to face the harsh world alone in an institution. She has now become the Good Shepherd for us both in terms of the ethical treatment of animals and the inclusive and loving care of people, seeing all as different, not less.

Today's reading in John 10 is part of a longer two-chapter story of the man born blind found in chapter 9. In the beginning of this story people wanted to only point blame for why this man was blind. "Who sinned the baby or the parents?" Was a burning question asked by the disciples and others. But even after he is healed and he praises Jesus for healing him, the leaders rejected him and cast him out of the temple for thinking differently and defending his healing. Even his parents denied the truth out of fear of societal rejection. This man was cast aside first for not being normal, and now cast aside for being healed and speaking up for the truth. The religious authorities could not see his own humanity and his deep faith. Jesus, at the end of chapter nine says that religious authorities are the ones who are sinful not the blind man for rejecting him and the healing Jesus brought. Today we understand that blindness, autism, deafness, and other divergent ways of being in the world require our understanding and accommodation not a cure. The work of the Americans with Disabilities Act advocates for accommodations to level the playing field and to create a more inclusive society for all people regardless of the abilities or divergence.

We look to John chapter ten to see the qualities of a Good Shepherd. A shepherd that knows his own and can call them by name. A Shepherd that opens and closes doors to both set free the flock into green pastures to grow and enjoy life and to protect them

from harm or becoming lost. A good shepherd offers abundant life and defend the lambs.

Jesus puts into stark relief the difference between the Good Shepherd and the imposters and thieves. “The thief comes to rob, kill and destroy. The shepherd comes to give life and life more abundantly.”

So, I ask you this: Who gave Temple life and life more abundantly and who sought to rob Temple of her gifts and passion for life? Who protected her from harm and who invaded her sense of safety and place in the community? Who was the good shepherd and who was the thief?

On this Good Shepherd Sunday and Autism Acceptance month, may we be modern day Good Shepherds in the lives of others creating a place of welcome and community where their diversity is celebrated. And may we be the voice of the great shepherd offering guidance and insights into a better life for all. Helping people love and embrace others as full members of society just as they are, because Christ first loved us just as we are.