

## Communion Meditation for Chief Elder Sunday

Ezekiel 34: 11-16

Home Moravian Church, November 10, 2024

A couple of weeks ago I attended a forum led by the Rev. Dr. Bill Leonard, the founding dean of the Wake Forest University School of Divinity and also my church history professor in 2007. I was so pleased to see him, and to hear him speak, after so many years.

In that forum, Dean Leonard expressed his concern for how Christianity is currently expressed in America. He said he is worried that we might be losing the meaning of Jesus. And he warned us that, once lost, the meaning of Jesus may be very difficult to recover.

Now you're waiting for me to tell you the meaning of Jesus. Well, in this particular forum, Dean Leonard's message was more about what *wasn't* the meaning of Jesus. For example: High status is *not* the meaning of Jesus. Worldly power is *not* the meaning of Jesus. Bossing everyone around is *not* the meaning of Jesus.

Not status, not power, not bossing around. But we do look to Jesus for leadership.

The Moravian Church recognizes Jesus Christ as our chief elder. That's not to say we think he's only *ours*. Jesus is head of the whole church, his body, which he created through the Holy Spirit. It's just that we, as Moravians, have historically acknowledged his leadership through the role of Chief Elder, which helps us keep all other meanings of leadership in perspective.

For those who may not know this history, or just love to hear the story as I do, here it is again.

In the eighteenth-century Moravian *Gemeine*, the highest position was chief elder of all the congregations worldwide. The job was impossibly comprehensive. The chief elder was supposed to know not only the temporal condition of each congregation, but the spiritual condition of each member's heart. It was more than Leonard Dober, serving that role in 1740, could possibly know. But this much he *did* know: He was exhausted; and so he asked to step down.

Who would be the next chief elder? In September 1741, ten representatives of the church met in London to resolve this leadership crisis. They deliberated for days, suggesting name after name, only to receive a negative answer each time they drew the lot. At last they recognized that the only leader who could really know and minister to each member's heart was Jesus Christ himself. And so they asked Jesus Christ whether he would serve in the office that, of course, he had actually held all along. On November 13, 1741, the leaders announced to the whole Moravian *Gemeine* the chief eldership of Jesus Christ, whom we continue to acknowledge as the head and savior of our church.

This is why we mark November 13 as a festival day, with its very own assigned scripture readings, which you've heard today. All of them have something to say about leadership. In the psalm, the Lord is "our sovereign." In Hebrews, Jesus is "a great high priest." In John 10, Jesus uses a "figure of speech" to explain the leadership of a shepherd, echoing images of the reading we just heard from Ezekiel: "Thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.... I will feed them with good pasture."

We might not think of leadership as *the* meaning of Jesus, but it's *a* meaning of Jesus, who gives a particular meaning to leadership. Shepherd is not a high-status, powerful job. Who

listens to a shepherd? Only the sheep. But they know his voice. And I'll bet they know his movements, too.

When Dean Leonard was my church history professor, I became familiar with the ways he moved his hands as he spoke. I'm sure all his students did. Those gestures conveyed so much. Broad arguments; fine, dicey points; surprising and delightful conclusions. After a while, you didn't really *see* the dean's gestures; it was more like you *heard* them, not with your ears, but with your body. His gestures guided your listening, encouraging you to follow along.

That sounds like something I came up with as I listened in church history class, but actually, I didn't know it until about five minutes into Dean Leonard's forum last week, when I noticed how happy I was feeling. Warm and safe all over. I loved being in the Dean's classes, and at the forum, sitting in a pew at Knollwood Baptist Church, I was reacting to his familiar gestures with my body, my memory, my heart. I felt encouraged to follow along.

And I started to wonder—I hope the Dean would forgive me for letting my mind wander at that point: What were *Jesus*' characteristic movements? Did the disciples come to know his gestures the way they knew his voice, hearing them with their bodies? In the gospel of John, the disciples were on a boat when Peter recognized the resurrected Christ standing on the shore. Maybe it was the way he moved his hands and spread his fingers and held out his arms—movements familiar to the disciples the way the movements of a shepherd are familiar to his flock, encouraging them to follow along.

We can hear meanings of Jesus in our readings today. Sovereign Lord: Fully divine, he carries all the attributes of God, which means that he is full of love. High priest—but, as the Hebrews reading says, not one “who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,” because he is also fully human, which means that he feels what we feel. The meaning of Jesus is that he

brings into the fully human experience a love that is fully divine—and *that* means that he regards every human as both worthy of love and capable of love, no matter how much we may doubt either possibility.

No one is excluded. No one is irredeemable. And everyone is called by name to be part of his flock, under his leadership. Leadership that does not strong-arm its way into worldly power. Leadership that does not seek high status. Leadership that is compassionate, full of love and grace. Leadership, we note in the Ezekiel reading, that will not comfort “the fat and the strong,” but will seek out the strayed, the injured, and the weak, whom the shepherd will feed with good pasture. The “fat and the strong” he “will feed ... with justice.”

The meaning of Jesus is not only in his words, but in his movements. Where does he go? Whom does he go seeking? To whom does he hold out his hands?

Our sovereign, our high priest, our shepherd, our chief elder leads us today to be nourished at this table. In his movements, we feel the meanings that we must never lose: a broad invitation; a complete understanding of all our complications; a surprising, delightful embrace. We are encouraged to follow along. Amen.