

"FEED MY SHEEP."

I thought that I was passing by a sheepfold, where the shepherds seemed a little loiter. But they were occupied entirely with the gate and the hurdles, and had turned their backs on the sheep. The pasture was bare and brown, little better in some places than a salt waste; the water was muddy and full of dead leaves. The sheep were not a number—thirty, I estimated, and looked scarcely more than half alive.

"What are you doing friends?" I asked of the shepherds.

"Our Master bids us to feed His sheep," they replied. "We want to attract these sheep out on the mountain side; they are his, too."

"And what are you doing to attract them?"

"Do you not see? We are giving the gate and the hurdles, in the hope that, when the sun shines on them, these outside sheep will be attracted by curiosity. Then when they come inside we can feed them."

"And why do you not feed those that are inside?"

"Oh, they are in; they are safe enough! They can pick up food for themselves. We have no time to attend to them as well as attract the outsiders, and the latter business is by far the most important. We have a further attraction also: we play on the shepherds' pipe. The outside sheep often come round to listen."

"But, friends, it is for the sheep inside that your concern is awakened. Your Master said, 'Feed my sheep.' Your guiding and music will never feed them. It is for the sheep outside that we must look. We do not feed them inside. Look, here is grass, and there are turnip-troughs."

"Do you call it grass? Poor, parched, unwhitening stuff! My good friends, these through want cleansing and filling up."

"Do you think we have any time for that? We must attend to these other things."

"Narrowly not to the neglect of the main thing? To what are you attracting these sheep? To what are you directing the others? Attention to starvation is not a very attractive idea."

"Then you would have us to spend all our time on the sheep inside, and never gather the others in at all?"

"By no means. I would have you to attract the outsiders; but I would have them attracted by fresh food and clear water, not by golden hurdles and shepherd's pipes. Let the outsiders say to themselves, 'The grass inside that fold is fresh and green, the water is clear and sparkling; these sheep are finer and fatter than we. Let us go in. Trust me, the true way to attract lost sheep is by letting them see that the found sheep are better off than they are; not by continual denunciations of the fact, but by forcing them to perceive it for themselves.'"

"That is exactly what we are trying to do. Therefore we give the hurdles to enclose them to come and look into the fold."

"And when they come and look in, you show them what a bare patch of ground, and a few half-starved sheep. It would be better to keep them away. My poor mistaken friends, the day is coming—ay, and fast too—when you will stand alone behind your golden hurdles; for the fold will be left empty. The sheep will either be starved to death, or will drag their emaciated limbs to other fields than ours, where there is yet green grass left, and the fountain of living water is fresh and pure. You will only keep the fold in existence by feeding the few sheep that are left. Will you put down the pump and lay aside the rod, and begin at once to clear out the water and fill the troughs? It is not quite too late. It soon will be."

"Does the parable need interpretation? Will the shepherds listen? The sheep are restless, because they are weary and hungry. They have been beating now some time; but the shepherds are so busy with their pipes and hurdles that they have no ears to hearken to."

"We, the poor sheep, may go from one part of the fold to another, and we find the green patches few and growing fewer. Only a few years ago—let us drop the metaphor—there were churches, one or two at least in every town, where we received from the pulpit the gospel of Jesus Christ, preached by quiet prayers and a little simple singing. It has almost become true to say that no such thing is left now. Everywhere our ears are dimmed with noise—not always a "cheerful noise"—choirsters shouting responses at the top of their lungs; and totally unseasonable, elaborate antiphones in which we can take no part, unless we happen to be studied vocalists, everything set to music, or at least made a recitative, which is capable of being so treated; our eyes are dazzled and bewildered on all sides by gorgeous altar cloths and banners, stained glass windows, carvings of wood and stone, till we might well begin to wonder if we had found our way into the South Kensington Museum by mistake. Flowers have already appeared in the chancel; it is naturally to be supposed that they will next make their way to the pews in the form of bouquets, for the entertainment of the ladies, and will perhaps be followed by boxes of the choicest Havana cigars, to relieve the tedium of the gentlemen. Indeed, why should eyes and ears be the only senses tickled? Trays of macaroons would be most acceptable to some members of the flock, the youngest portion especially; and it is the younger members of the congregation whom it is the present fashion to consider."

"Why, moreover, are the young to be specially considered; that is, to receive more than their due share of consideration? Is it because they are the most sensible part of the congregation? Is it from it, is it because they are the most spiritual? Surely not. Why, then, do you look upon young souls as of more value than the old?"

"Oh, we are told, 'we must consult the tastes of the young, we must keep them at all costs—they are the church of the future!'"

"When did your Master bid you consult the tastes and fancies of your flock,—particularly of one part of your flock,—to the detriment of the rest? He would have a strange steward who should insist on feeding the entire household on milk, because there were among them babies who could take nothing else. The business of the steward is to serve out to

each member of the household his portion of meat—the portion suited to his own—in due season. But your action is even worse than this. You feed the whole household, not on pure milk, but on cream and sugar-plums; not on what is wholesome, even for children, not on what is good for the children's fancy. This may be a very convenient arrangement for the young, but it is not for promoting the health of the household.

"Then as to the 'church of the future.' Friends, what have you to do with that? What can you do to it? It is better than that you should be taking proper care of the church of the present? Your orders are to 'revere your own generation according to the will of God'—to 'feed the flock of God which is among you.' If He desires that you shall also serve Him, He will bring it to pass. There are very few men who are wisely called to that work, and no man has a right to take the honor unto himself.

"Feed my lambs" was said once—'feed my sheep' twice. Did the Lord foreseer that the shepherds would be more apt to neglect the sheep than the lambs? Also, in one of the two instances, it is literally 'shepherd my sheep.' How is this precept obeyed, when the poor sheep are left to pick up such meagre scraps as they can find for themselves?

"Do we all speak the truth when we stand up and say, 'I believe in the Holy Ghost?' If we did so, should we think all these 'attractions' needful? Should we not rather be content to wait in secret with the Angel of the Covenant, and to leave the attracting power to Him who will 'draw all men unto Him'?

"But are all these not Ritualistic churches? Would they were! They are the very churches from which, but a few years back, we were wont to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. Where is it now? O, in the pulpit, of course! The object of all this is to lead up to that. Then in most cases it fails woefully. We listen in vain for the old sounds of the trumpet. Something has come over our ministers. Can they tell us what? We get plenty of essays on the moral virtues, abundance of histories of St. Paul and Elijah, the T-tribe, only too many narratives from Scripture couched in the most elegant language of the nineteenth century; a great deal of information about the geography and scenery of the Holy Land, a great deal of respectful allusion to the wonders of science, and not a little apology for intruding on our refined and educated ears that rough and primitive thing called 'Christianity.' It is really reasonable—quite proper and consonant with science—this Christianity.

"These are the apologies! It is always a painful sight to see a child apologizing for his father's servant for his master. But when it comes to the assurance, from the King's ambassadors to the rebels, that their royal Master is really honest, and that His word may reasonably be trusted, can the loyal subjects sit and listen with any feelings short of burning indignation? You were charged with a command, and you stood to offer an apology! Sent with a message of forgiveness, you treat with convicted rebels as you might with independent sovereigns."

"Alas! When the Son of man cometh, shall He find Faith on the earth?"

"One thing amid all this we do not find. Dear shepherds, we miss it sorely. Will you not give it us, even though it may involve a chant the less to give you time, and a little less attention to your university department, to set you at liberty for prayer and study? We want Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. Science was not crucified for us, nor were we baptized in the name of music. For God's sake, and for our souls' sake, give us back our houses of prayer, and let those who do not want to pray go and fill the concert halls.

"You tell us that your congregations demand these things. But what does 'Christ demand of you? Is it your place to lead you up the hills, and permit them to drag you down into the valleys? Where is the old spirit of 'Neh-miah among you? "I am doing a great work, so that I can not come, whither I should. The work ceases, whist I leave it and come down to you."

"The truth is, it is not to have it out, that to the majority of the congregation God is not at all interesting. What they want is something that shall be more entertaining than He is. Is it your place to supply them with this? or is it your place to feed the sheep? The older, wiser, more advanced part of your flock to be the portion left untended? Could you not give a little consideration to the unmusical, the unscientific, who are rich in faith, and are terribly weary of these husks which they assume to eat?"

"But perhaps you ask, 'What does the truth?' It is recorded that a newly-wedded wife once told her husband that his preaching would starve any congregation in England. "Why," he asked, in astonishment, "do I not preach the truth?" "Yes, you do," said she, "and so you would if you stood all day in the pulpit saying that my name is Mary." You do give us truth, but you tell us just what we could tell you—what we should think suited to a class of Sunday-school children. The best teacher has been said to be that man who is just one lesson in advance of his pupils. Keep in advance of us, and we will ask you for no more: There is too little dew on the grass you offer us, too little of the 'ointment poured forth.' There is too little of the stale, unmitigated. How can it be other wise when you have left the word of God, and are serving tables? It is not that we ask you for something different, but for something more—something deeper, richer, fuller.

"Not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power."

"There was once a clergyman—he is gone to his rest now—who preached most deeply spiritual sermons. He fed the sheep, but he lived and died a nearly unknown man. His church was never full; but those who came there were souls. He used to say, 'I would rather have a congregation of five living souls than of five hundred dead ones.' The sheep, however, who should insist on feeding the entire household on milk, because there were among them babies who could take nothing else. The business of the steward is to serve out to

those who came. The full ones went to me and strengthened me." The true prayer of the true Christian is a breathing of the heart's desires right into an ear that is close by. And I don't believe that that ear is ever deaf to the prayer of faith. Every proper desire from the heart of God shall find some proper and wise answer in the desire of God himself.

2. Then again, if we habitually live near to God we should strive to realize his constant companionship. What is a consecrated place? Is it only the church-edifice or the cathedral? Wherever the soul finds God is a sacred spot. Jacob on his pillow of stone in the silent night-solitude, exclaimed: "How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God, and the gate of Heaven." The immediate intercourse with God in the workshop, and the counting-room, and the study, and the kitchen and the farmer's field sacred with God's presence. The nursery in which the pious mother trains her child is one of God's dwelling-places; and I have seen many a sick chamber that was literally like the vestibule of Heaven. In addition to this sense of God's presence with him in his daily calling, every Christian who would maintain a healthy, vigilant and happy life should have times and places for the immediate intercourse with the Divine Master. Those of us who reside in large towns are apt to live under high pressure. The world puts its grip on us as soon as we open the morning paper; it follows us to the store, the shop and the factory; it follows us to the dining-room, and the evening finds, too many a Christian too busy and too tired to attend even once or twice a week the devotional meetings of his church. Amid all this melange of excitement and hurry, how little chance seems to be afforded for quiet fellowship with God?

Yet the Christian who must cultivate a close heart-life with God must manage somehow to find time or make time for feeding his soul as well as his body. I know of a pious merchant who had a place for secret prayer up in the loft of his warehouse. This was his Bethel. Daniel was a prodigiously busy man in Babylon, but he managed to get a special interview with God three times a day on his knees. The noble Christian philanthropist, the late William E. Dodge, used to rise early and get a quiet hour with his Bible and his Master before he ventured into the roaring tumult of the day. He came out from this communion early in the morning, and in the evening with God with his face shining. Such an early hour of quiet fellowship with prayer has a most potent influence to keep the whole day from reveling out into frivolities and worldly compliances, and grasping covetousness. Mr. Garrett N. Beecher—whom many of my Baptist readers will remember as a shining light in their denomination—made it his practice to go home at noon and dine with his family. He took that time to 'cool off' from business, and to get a nooning with God in a short season of secret prayer. Every follower of Christ who would maintain a strong and holy life every day over His Word, but should have his Bethels, or his Olivets, or some set place and time for locking his soul in with Jesus. Martin Luther affirmed that during the heats of his great life-battle he would not get on his knees for two hours each day in prayer; it was his tremendous grip on God that enabled him to vanquish the powers of darkness.

3. Here, too, lies the secret of the genuine higher life. It is simply living in God, and in God through His Word, and through the work in our own houses and places of business. It is keeping our citizenship in Heaven and our eyes above the wretched mists that lie near the ground, and our hearts in close touch with Christ. They that thus wait on God shall receive their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles. They out-fly the petty vexations that worry the worldling, and the groveling cares and lusts that drag selfish sinners down into the mire. Their outlook is broad; their spiritual atmosphere is fragrant; they shall receive their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles. They out-fly the petty vexations that worry the worldling, and the groveling cares and lusts that drag selfish sinners down into the mire. Their outlook is broad; their spiritual atmosphere is fragrant; they shall receive their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles. 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