

Monday, March 17: Sticks and Stones

Written by Stephanie Kimec Parker, Coordinator for Church Revitalization, United Methodist Coastal Virginia District, Virginia

<https://open.spotify.com/track/236Joyhsvc06vmBkKjCFwf?si=a6abc481effc4a74>

I first heard this song a few years ago when I was listening to the *Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast. I found myself regularly angered and astonished at the actions of the Pastor, Mark Driscoll, of Mars Hill. For any who have not listened to the podcast or know the story, Mars Hill was led by Mark Driscoll who in 2014 resigned after staff members and congregants alleged abusive behavior. One elder of Mars Hill accused Driscoll of being “domineering, verbally violent, arrogant, and quick-tempered.” Kraft further argued that this “established pattern of ... behavior disqualified Driscoll from church leadership.” As a pastor in the local church at the time, the podcast and especially this song, served as a powerful reminder of the sacredness of the work of the church. Lay and clergy are invited into people’s lives in very vulnerable times: during a crisis, following the death of a family member, during preparation for marriage etc. We must constantly hold one another accountable to our motivations as we have the power to build up or tear down a person, and church hurt adds an extra layer of pain.

In Ezekiel 34, God’s word comes to Ezekiel about the current shepherds and their massive shortcomings.

Ezekiel 34:1-8 CEB: *The Lord’s word came to me: ² Human one, prophesy against Israel’s shepherds. Prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims to the shepherds: Doom to Israel’s shepherds who tended themselves! Shouldn’t shepherds tend the flock? ³ You drink the milk, you wear the wool, and you slaughter the fat animals, but you don’t tend the flock. ⁴ You don’t strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, or seek out the lost; but instead you use force to rule them with injustice. ⁵ Without a shepherd, my flock was scattered; and when it was scattered, it became food for all the wild animals. ⁶ My flock strayed on all the mountains and on every high hill throughout all the earth. My flock was scattered, and there was no one to look for them or find them. ⁷ So now shepherds, hear the Lord’s word! ⁸ This is what the Lord God says: As surely as I live, without a shepherd, my flock became prey. My flock became food for all the wild animals. My shepherds didn’t seek out my flock. They tended themselves, but they didn’t tend my flock.*

These shepherds were good at tending themselves, but they failed to tend God’s flock. They didn’t strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, sought out the strays or lost. The flock instead became scattered and prey.

The song *Sticks and Stones* sounds like it was written by a flock that has been scattered and become prey. And while the song speaks to the role of the people in pledging allegiance to the “purpose of progress,” we also see how while they were being led by a shepherd who tended himself, the deep wounds and trauma as a consequence to the health, or unhealthiness, of the shepherd. In the

shepherd's unhealth, it became about him and no longer about God. We are dust, and we see the dangers when we forget that we are from dust and to dust we shall return. When we play "god in the process," we have failed to repent and return to God. When we play "god in the process" we have built ourselves as idols.

Our dustiness is a good thing, it helps us to remember our mortality and that we are not God. We need God, on our own we have the bent towards sin that John Wesley described, we will make it about us and our needs. We can justify just about anything.

There is another way as shepherds. As pastors and lay people, we are called to be shepherds, good shepherds, who point others to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. John 10 is a direct contrast to Ezekiel 34.

John 10:11-16 CEB

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That's because he isn't the shepherd; the sheep aren't really his. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ He's only a hired hand and the sheep don't matter to him.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.

While we are from dust, we point others to Jesus who is from God, the Good Shepherd, the one who willingly lays down his life for the flock. We are both assistant shepherds as co-laborers with Christ, and sheep. When we embrace our dustiness, when we recognize who is the one Good Shepherd, we can help others to see the "honest mission," and help others to "give and taste forgiveness." It is Christ who we are accountable to, ensuring we do not become "god in the process" but instead point others to the true God.