Something that is fun to do, in a sort of depressing way, is to compare what people say they are doing with what they are actually doing. For example, the other day billionaire Richard Branson took a little ride into space. On returning he said, “Space is extraordinary; the universe is magnificent. I want people to be able to look back at our beautiful Earth and come home and work very hard to try to do magic to it to look after it.” It all sounds nice until you realize that the carbon footprint of his 90-minute ride into space was several times larger than the carbon footprint of what the average person produces in a year. By polluting more, he was saving the world from pollution. People like to tell themselves stories about what they are doing without ever bothering to see if they are actually doing the thing they claim to be doing. And sometimes it produces amusing hypocrisy while other times it creates real danger like what we hear in the warning from Jeremiah today when we read, “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord….It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them….I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.”

At first blush this may seem like the hypocrisy I was previously discussing but if you ever go to *Indeed* and are browsing shepherding jobs you might notice that part of the job description is to “guard, tend and herd sheep” not to scatter them. And it is very hard to guard, tend and herd sheep in Milwaukee if the sheep are down in Chicago hanging out with Mrs. O’Leary’s cow. But of course, this passage is not really about the proper care and maintenance of livestock. Those being called shepherds are those who according to the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary are entrusted, “to effect a righteous rule through the house of David.” In other words, the shepherds are the spiritual leaders of Israel who are supposed to guide the people towards God but in today’s context they are sending the sheep out higgledy-piggledy while believing that they are actually doing the will of God. And so here is the weird thing about today’s sermon – it is kind of about me, because, like it or not, I am, at least on paper, your shepherd. And so, you can sit back and relax for a while and not worry about where you are falling short of God’s expectations but can look to see all of the ways that I am falling short of God’s expectations.

When I was getting ready to leave my deployment in Qatar and come home, I had an interesting interaction with another chaplain, and by interesting, I mean kind of disturbing. This chaplain was trying to understand his responsibilities and one of his questions had to do with the distribution of communion at the service he would be leading. But his primary interest was in understanding the mechanism by which he would be able to keep away from communion those individuals who did not share his exact understanding and views on the nature of Christianity. In other words, he wanted to make sure that he had the authority to really scatter the sheep. He saw his job as chaplain not as taking care of all the military members entrusted to his care but rather about running off the sheep who were of the wrong kind. I am aware that refusal of communion has been in the news in regards to the Roman Catholic Church and I really do not want to wade into that discussion. Rather what I want to point out by this story is that while scattering may occur it should not be our first instinct. That is, as clergy, our primary focus should not be on the things that divide us rather about the things that unite us.

The reality of life is that we all have our own preferences. These preferences can cover a vast array of topics like what we eat, how we dress, where we vacation or what we read. And this is part of what makes life interesting but it can also be used as a way to separate us one from another. I think I have used this example before but to be a chaplain in the military you have to be endorsed by a religious endorsing agency that is recognized by the Department of Defense. So, for example, I am endorsed by the Episcopal Church and Bishop Carl Wright. It all sounds simple enough until you realize that there are 205 endorsing agencies recognized by the Department of Defense. Two are Muslim, one is Buddhist, one is Jewish and the remaining 201 are Christian. Those who trace their origin to the Church of England (i.e. Anglicans like us) have eight other choices besides the Episcopal Church. These include The Anglican Church, The Anglican Church in America, The Anglican Church in North America and The Anglican Church of the Americas. Why do all of these exist? Why are the nine different Anglican Churches acknowledged by the Department of Defense and 192 other Christian churches? They exist because someone has been spreading a lot of sheep. I know that Jesus said there were many rooms in his Father’s house but from where I am sitting it is starting to look more like the MGM Grand in Las Vegas than a house.

And so why if God commands leaders to not scatter the sheep do so many leaders do it? I don’t know exactly but I can tell you why it is something that troubles me so deeply. When I was going through the process to see if I would be approved to go off to seminary it was shortly after the time when Gene Robinson, an openly gay man, had become Bishop of New Hampshire. The church was in turmoil and was marked by infighting, finger pointing and threats of departure. In my interview one of the clergy asked me why I would be interested in coming into a church as a leader that was in such turmoil. Now perhaps I was young and naïve but I said that as someone who found the Episcopal church in my twenties, I was convinced that it was too wonderful to give up on and that I wanted to see it thrive. The people on the committee nodded in agreement and seemed very pleased with my answer. Roughly two years after that meeting my diocese voted to leave the Episcopal Church because it believed the national church to be in error. They eventually were one of the founding dioceses of The Anglican Church of North America and just as a side note they are probably about a third of the size that they were when I went through my meeting. It is a tragedy because of all the scattering that has happened in the intervening years.

There is an old expression that when you have a hammer every problem looks like a nail. I think once clergy decide that separation and scattering is an option then every difference of opinion or theology be it large or small is an opportunity to move on to scatter the sheep. But as we hear in Jeremiah today, God is not a big fan of this and says that since the leadership has failed, he will take things into his own hands. He will gather all of those who have spread hither and yon and bring them back into his fold. Which is really the answer because this division in the body of Christ happens when leadership forgets to put God first. Any decision within Christ’s body should never involve the sentence, “we have the votes” because such a decision means someone will win and someone will lose. Someone will be in the church and someone will be outside. Certainly we will have differences of opinion, certainly some people will simply be wrong but the solution is not to declare them anathema. Rather it is to tend them like the Good Shepherd so that they may be part of Christ’s Church this day and forevermore.