

What I Did for Love

Summerlea U.C.
Rev. Scott A. Patton
April 24, 2021

I John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

The 4th Sunday of Easter – Good Shepherd Sunday

Prayer:

Loving God, as we gather for worship in this season of resurrection, this season of new life, we turn to you knowing that new life is found only in you. May the presence of the risen Christ fill this place of worship, and fill our lives with fresh hope. May we, like the first disciples, come to know the presence and the power of the risen Christ, in our lives and in our world.

And now, may the words of my mouth... Amen.

In our worship today, we are looking at and reflecting upon the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It is an image or a way of thinking about Jesus that is as old as the gospel texts themselves. In John's gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. In the other gospels, Jesus is referred to as being like a shepherd. Many hymns and poems have been written that speak of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and so, it is certainly a prominent and well-known image.

Whether it is an image that is helpful to us, or not, is another matter. Perhaps some might conclude that there are other images or ways of thinking about Jesus that have more to do with the realities of our own time and culture, and therefore make more sense or have more meaning for us. Sometimes, images of Jesus from the past are not always helpful to us as we seek to know and understand the Jesus who is among us in our lives and in our world today.

And yet, the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is certainly not one that is foreign to us; because even some of the words we use to describe the work of the church derive from this image of the shepherd. For example, the words "pastor" and "pastoral care" are both derived from aspects of shepherding. The congregation is sometimes referred to as "the flock", and, of course, when a minister lures a member of another congregation into his or her own congregation, this is usually referred to as "sheep stealing."

So, even though we don't have many shepherds among us today to help us to better understand this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, it is an image that has been around for a long time and one that we have been accustomed to using.

But, like many images, especially ones that are only remotely connected to our experience, we tend to take the best of what that image has to offer and simply leave out the parts that don't fit as well. So, I can appreciate the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd for what it is trying to convey to us: like the shepherd who truly knows and cares for the sheep and keeps them from harm, so Jesus cares for us and is intimately connected to our lives and concerned with our well-being. It is a metaphor that is very comforting and gives us a feeling of love and care and protection.

Today, we heard a passage from John's gospel in which Jesus refers to himself by saying, "I am the Good Shepherd." This is part of several "I am" statements in John's gospel: Jesus also says, "I am the bread of life," and "I am the light of the world," among others. Each of these is a metaphor for who Jesus is and what he reveals to us about God.

And clearly, John wants us to make a connection between Jesus and God with the "I am" part of the statement. This relates to a passage in the 3rd chapter of the Book of Exodus, the story of Moses' encounter with God through the burning bush.

In this encounter, Moses is told by God that God is aware of the suffering of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians, and that Moses has been appointed to lead them out of slavery in Egypt to a place that would be their homeland, a place where they could be free and where life would be good.

However, as Exodus 3 records:

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'the God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'what is [God's] name?', what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses "I am who I am." [And] further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you'."

It seems quite clear to me that John is connecting the "I am" statements from Jesus with the God whose name is "I am." It is as if Jesus is saying to us, "look at what my life is about and that will tell you something of what God is like." And Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me...The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I have other sheep that do

not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

We are KNOWN by God, and we are LOVED by God. Each and every one of us. And in today’s passage from John, as well as in the words of the 23rd Psalm, we have words that reveal to us what God has done because of that love that God has for us, what God IS DOING, and what God WILL DO, or what God can be trusted to do in the future.

Jesus is the shepherd who cares for the sheep so much that he is willing even to lay down his life for them. “I know my own,” says Jesus, “and my own know me.” It is the same kind of knowing and loving that we can experience on a human level, and thus have a taste of what the loving relationship between ourselves and God is like.

I remember very clearly a story that one of my minister colleagues told one time about the ways that someone close to us can know us and recognize us with even the subtlest hints that they are near. She told the story about how she and her mother used to play badminton together about twice a year at the club that her mother belonged to.

On this one occasion, she had gone through the locker room door and was walking down the hallway to the area where the women got changed. Before she even got into the room, she heard a very delicate sniffing sound. As she turned the corner, she was already smiling, prepared to greet her mother. She knew that her mother’s allergies caused her to occasionally make that very slight sniffing sound, and she knew that the tiny sound she was hearing was her mother, even before she actually saw her.

As she rounded the corner, smiling and ready to greet her mother, she found that her mother was smiling in the same way, already prepared to greet her daughter. She knew that it was her daughter approaching down the hallway because she could somehow distinguish that the sounds of the steps she heard were those of her daughter.

That is the same way that God knows us, only more and better. God is intimately connected with us, not necessarily because we are always lovable, but because God chooses to love us. In dying and rising from death, Jesus has revealed God’s will that all the world will live in loving relationship with God.

Like any loving parent, God wants to protect us from harm. But like any parent knows, we often cannot prevent our loved ones from experiencing tragedy and grief and hurt and trouble. All we can do is stay with them through those moments, and remind them that we love them.

It is the very same way with God. God is the shepherd who walks with us even through the valley of the shadow of death. Through all that might come our way and threaten us, in all that seeks to bring us pain and stands between us and the joy and fullness of life that is God's intention for us, God is there, walking beside us, and leading us to places of healing and fulfillment.

That is why the early church community to which the First Letter of John was written emphasized that the goal of living is to abide in God's love. Just as the sheep rely on the protection of the shepherd in times of danger, so the early Christians, in a hostile environment, had to rely on the love and caring of those around them. For them, to truly celebrate and to give thanks for God's love was to live that love with each other, or to "...love...in truth and action" as 1st John puts it.

Surely, it is this kind of love to which we aspire on this Good Shepherd Sunday. No one can say that they abide in God's love and refuse to help a brother or sister in need. No one can say that they abide in God's love and refuse to accept another person whose beliefs are different from their own. As it says elsewhere in scripture, "as God has loved us, so we ought to love one another."

Everything that God has done for us has been done because of the great love God has for us. If the story of God's interaction with us throughout our lives and throughout human history were to have a theme song, it could very well be "What I Did for Love." We cannot now even begin to comprehend the depth of love with which God loves us. But we can begin to make it known by attempting to live our lives by the principle of love; reaching out in love and caring to ALL, because ALL are part of the family, and ALL are in need of love, and ALL are equally loved by God, who knows us, cares for us, and walks with us always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.