

“Being Good Shepherds”
April 25, 2021
Scripture: I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

This Sunday, the fourth of Eastertide, is traditionally called “Good Shepherd” Sunday. In addition to the passages I read, the Psalm for the day is Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...” We’ll sing a version of that at the end of our worship. The imagery of God and Jesus as shepherd is sprinkled all through the Bible. King David, you may remember, was a shepherd before being anointed king. And Moses was a shepherd when he went to investigate a burning bush. The shepherd is a powerful metaphor.

That may be a little surprising since it’s pretty well documented that as a social class shepherds were pretty close to the bottom. David was a shepherd because he was the youngest of Jesse’s sons. He was doing the grunt work that was beneath the dignity of his older brothers. Being a shepherd was an isolated, dirty existence. And it was dangerous. There were predators out there, and it was the shepherd’s job to make sure the sheep were protected. That could have meant some pretty up-close encounters with lethal creatures. There were no guns to shoot from a great distance. So, all in all, being a shepherd was probably not a plum job.

Yet here we have Jesus calling himself the “good shepherd.” That sort of implies there were a lot of bad shepherds out there. There are two things that make Jesus the good shepherd: first, he knows the sheep. To know those you’re responsible for means they’re not objects. The other night Beth and I watched an episode of “Finding Your Roots” hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. He was exploring the family history of newscaster Don Lemon from CNN, who is Black. Among the documents Gates’ team uncovered was a listing from 1850 or 1860 of a slave owner related to Don Lemon, as it turned out. The list of possessions included only ages and genders, no names. These enslaved people, some of whom the owner had apparently sired, were nothing but objects. Seeing that list and knowing his own ancestor was represented on it, made Lemon break down into tears. Even now, generations later, the pain of being objectified is real. Jesus knows his sheep—red or yellow, black or white, they are precious in his sight.

Second, the good shepherd is willing to sacrifice himself for the sheep: “I lay down my life for the sheep.” I think it’s clear how influential this gospel is for the writer of First John. They’re practically quoting this passage. But of course Jesus is talking about himself; he’s not calling on his followers to do the same. In the letter that responsibility is extended beyond Jesus to the whole community. “We’re all meant to be good shepherds,” the writer seems to say. We’re all meant to lay down our lives for one another. Now, certainly most of them, most of us, will never be called upon to do this literally, the way Jesus does. So how do we live up to that expectation? What is the life we lay down?

I’ve always felt the writer of First John is sort of the church’s first mystic. They’re talking about an interior reality, a way of seeing the world that involves the spirit; what the mystics call the “third eye.” But how that’s expressed is material. We lay down our life in a spiritual way by relinquishing our ego and its demands on us, but we interact with others by looking after their material needs: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s

goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” This person is a very practical mystic, as the best of them are. Spiritual awareness without action in the world on behalf of others is hollow and pointless. I think Jesus teaches that over and over in the gospels. And those who follow him realize the two always go hand in hand.

Among the things we’re learning these days is how inextricably entangled we are with one another. Our actions affect the people around us; even our breathing can cause unintended harm. So, we have a responsibility to be aware of one another in ways we never had before. That means we must put aside our egos and lay down our lives for each other. It’s for protection. Ultimately that’s what Jesus is talking about when he calls himself the good shepherd. He protects the sheep with his own body. In other words, personal risk is woven into our life together.

This past week we’ve seen just how important taking that risk can be. Last May when George Floyd was murdered at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, there were people present who witnessed what was happening but were powerless to intervene. One of them, a young woman named Darnella Frazier, recorded what was happening on her phone and then posted it online. Without her taking that risk the world would have ignored what happened to George Floyd. While he could not be protected, her willingness to risk her own safety at 17 years old by standing there and documenting this crime may help protect others in the future. George Floyd went from becoming a statistic, lost in the deep well of racial injustice in this country to being a person who was known and valued.

Transforming the ethos of racism in our country requires that we who have power by virtue of our skin color and access to wealth lay down our lives for those who are left out and whose lives are de-valued. We are called to be good shepherds not because we have authority over others but because we are responsible for one another’s safety and wholeness. And even though it’s pretty clear that the writer of First John was mostly talking about members of his or her community, our example is Jesus and he seems to make no distinctions between who’s in and who’s out. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,” he insists. So, our circle of responsibility can’t be limited only to those immediately around us or who look and think and believe like us. The gospel of love and sacrifice is meant for the world. We are meant to lay down our life for the world.

And when we do, when we take that call seriously and really apply ourselves to it, amazing things can happen. Millions can take to the streets to call for justice. Millions can become engaged in acts of compassion. We can be brought to the deeper awareness of our interdependence and mutual care that the writer of First John is begging that community to discover. When we set aside our egos, lay down our lives, we find the freedom to live for others that’s always eluded us. The call to be good shepherds is the call to be imitators of Christ, to open our hearts and allow God’s Spirit to mold us in the image of Christ. We can change this world by loving those whom Christ loves and laying down our lives so others may rise. In this way Christ’s love will abide in us and we will abide in Christ.

Amen