

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 21, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus
1st Reading: I John 3:16-24; 2nd Reading: Acts 4:5-12
Scripture for Message: John 10:11-18 “The Good Shepherd”

When we hear the word “good” a translation of the Greek word *kalos* not necessarily the opposite of bad that we usually give that meaning but it means good more in the sense of model or exemplary – Jesus is the “Model” Shepherd. I think it has been some time since we looked at this scripture and tried to understand what Jesus was telling his followers, and us, with this analogy of the Good Shepherd.

Giving this some context – Jesus is making these statements to the Pharisees and to a larger crowd who have witnessed and questioned his healing of the “man born blind.” The Pharisees cannot understand his parable of the sheep and sheepfold and they reject Jesus’ claim to be the door and the Good Shepherd. For them, the light, the fountain of water, and the shepherd come from the law reserved for the children of Israel only, and that they will always have. Jesus tells them he is the light of the entire world, and he now tells them he will gather into one-fold the sheep who yet do not belong to “this” fold. They reject the notion that, through Jesus, now living water is available to anyone who thirsts. This is one more reason the Pharisees use to get rid of Jesus.

Jesus tells them, and us, he is the good shepherd, he is the one who lays down his life for the sheep. This is God’s exceptional commitment to humanity - a singular act of Jesus through which salvation is available to all – no one else did this for us. I wonder if the Pharisees got the message when Jesus tells them that the hired hands, not the shepherd and not the sheep owner, would run away and scatter the sheep when danger came near. The ‘hired hands’ are only concerned with appearances. Are the Pharisees the ones Jesus speaks of the ones who care more about how they obey the law of the Torah. They do not care for the sheep or the “salvation” of the sheep.

Jesus repeats, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” This is an expression of relationship – an intimate knowledge like how the father knows the son and the son knows the father. Jesus is talking about more than just familiarity – he is talking about a deep knowledge of those who belong to his flock. Just as sheep know the voice of the one who leads them and protects them so too does the shepherd know which “sheep” belong to him alone. This type of knowing is rooted in love, love for God and love for humanity.

Jesus speaks of the sheep that know him, who recognize and follow him because, unlike the Pharisees he is currently addressing, they are willing to listen, hear, and learn from Jesus. Remember, if you stop listening to the Word, you lose your ability to hear the Word. That is where Jesus holds power, in the care and healing of those who believe and follow him. Jesus gives the “sheep” of his fold his presence and attention. As shepherd, Jesus brings life, healing, and salvation to his followers. Being an instrument of care and healing is precisely what is unkillable – these words are what gets Jesus into trouble. The empire, its rulers, and religious authorities claim to hold the power of life and death over the citizens – Jesus’ words threaten that claim.

I wonder too if Jesus’ claiming “other sheep” who would listen to his voice threatened the religious authorities. As stated earlier, the religious authorities claimed to be the keeper of the one true fold and only those with the proper pedigree and lineage were members of that

flock. The prospect of the world outside of Israel drawn in through Jesus' willingness to give of himself unto death and ushering in a kingdom open to all nations threatened the religious authorities.

In the scripture we read from Acts, Peter and John also get into trouble for preaching Jesus' words and for healing, helping, and giving life in Jesus' name. They too held true power as God's instruments of care and healing which threatened the power of the empire. True power, through God, is not about imitating empire through a language of authority and rule, but about restoring bodies to wholeness. The empire claimed power over its citizens – power to take lives. Jesus' disciples proved God alone had the power that they exercised in Jesus' name. That is what the religious authorities at the time feared most – if Jesus' work threatened the empire, he also threatened their power.

These authorities are familiar with the Psalms and Jesus words suggest the words of the 23rd Psalm – our call to worship this morning. This is Jesus' claim – to gather his flock and to give life. To lead them beside still waters and green pastures – to restore them and give comfort. The hired hands or false prophets are not life-givers, but thieves interested only in personal gain. They are the people, Pharisees for example, who cannot save and are unwilling to lay down their life for others but claim authority over others. Jesus proves himself to be the only one who saves and the only one who willing lays down his life.

When we reflect on the Good Shepherd and read the words John writes in the first "letter" to his churches and reminds us of the great love Jesus had for humanity, God had for humanity that led to the event of the cross. That is the love that we know, through Jesus, and that is the love he commands us to show others. True faith follows the example of Jesus the Christ and models charity and love in the world. John writes, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." This knowing and being known that Jesus speaks of, comes from love.

So church, how do we show this love to our neighbors? How do we show faith and love to a world that uses the bible and faith in God as weapons? How do we help others come to know God and help others appreciate that they are known by God. That is our mission as a church – to share the love of Christ and change lives ministering grace and peace – **HOW DO WE DO THAT?**

I heard a story – there was a man working for a government aid agency, Milton somebody, whose name was the same as an economist Milton somebody. Once, a pastor of a wealthy church, thinking he was calling the economist Milton for investment advice, inadvertently reached the other Milton somebody. The pastor asked for advice about what the church could do with their surplus wealth, Milton somebody who worked for the government thought for a moment and answered, "Have you thought about giving it to the poor?"

The pastor replied, “Are you the real economist, Milton?” To which Milton answered back, “Are you the real church?”

Are we the real church? What does it mean for us, as followers of Jesus, to lay down our lives for one another? I wonder if John expresses it best – “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need yet refuses help?” How do we lay down our lives for one another – we help those in need, sacrifice for the greater good, love in truth and action, resist evil, work to free those oppressed by violence or greed. In short, we share the love of Christ. We love as Jesus loved. We minister grace and peace through presence and attention to the “least of these.”

In the aftermath of a global pandemic there are challenges to a ministry of grace and peace. We face an epidemic of isolation and loneliness. Our children have lost the feeling of security outside the home and are more fearful than ever. There seems to be a greater incidence of fear in our interactions with others. A general attitude of suspicion, and lack of trust has found a home in our everyday dealings with others. We no longer have faith in our government, we mistrust our elected officials particularly if we perceive them to be on the “other side” politically. We demonize those who are different or who might disagree with us. We have lost our connections with each other. Hiding behind masks, we are strangers to each other.

I see it in the church as well, people who stayed away from crowds for fear of contracting the COVID virus have not returned to their former congregations. It is too easy to stay at home and feel they know God and know Jesus without the benefit of fellowship within a Christian community. It is too easy to think they receive their spiritual food through the televangelists. I know, and you who attend worship regularly know, nothing could be further from the truth. How do we overcome the general isolationist attitudes that permeate our current society? I wonder if that is why there is so much fear in our world – we have lost our connection with each other in a real sense. What are we willing to risk, to sacrifice, to help people know they are known by God / Jesus?

There are ways this church reaches out to help others know they are known. We work diligently through the bridge to assist the “needy brothers and sisters in Christ.” We donate to the food pantries; we make donations to the Kids at Risk program and to the Elder Care program. We make donations through our general church to organizations like Week of Compassion and Disciples Mission Fund. We put our loose change in the Coins for A Cause jars to aid various charities like the Endless Mountains Pregnancy Care Center and the Society of St. Andrew or Disciples Mission Fund for example. We maintain a presence in this community and, when our phone rings, someone is here to answer. That is not always the case in a lot of churches these days.

In addition, we offer space and hospitality to diverse groups including the recovery groups, the scouts, and those who are looking for employment or working toward a general equivalency high school diploma. We do this not because of some selfish desire but because

there is a need and as Christians – we follow Christ in laying down our lives in a figurative sense to help others. I wonder if working outside the four walls of this church building is just as important to our mission. Jesus told the Pharisees, in his Good Shepherd discourse, there are “other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also . . . so there will be one flock, one shepherd” one family of God.

Who is it that we would place outside the “fold”? Do Jesus’ words convict us with the knowledge that there are others Jesus desires to bring into the family? Is this our call to take the Word outside our walls and accept the unacceptable, love the unlovable? The task of the church is to help others hear his voice so we can include them included in the family of God. We do this with our lives – symbols of the body of Christ and mimicking what life in the family of God is like.

Church, we must look beyond the culture of isolation and division and show love of Christ to the world through truth and action. To love one another, just as he has commanded us. “And by this we will know that we are from the truth.”