

“Love in Truth and Action”
Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

April 25, 2021
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Our passage today comes in the middle of the Easter season, and it is about Jesus being the Good Shepherd. It feels that this passage is one that wants us to think about who the risen Christ is. Today we think about him as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Having laid down his life, he then takes it up again and here we are in the season of Easter, thinking about what that means.

Some of the things we think about with Jesus being the Good Shepherd are that he knows his sheep, he leads them, and they know his voice. I may have told this story before, but there was a point in our lives when we had some sheep that got out of their pasture one evening. We went looking for them, and finally I found the group next door in our neighbor's field. At first, I wondered how I was going to get these sheep back over to our field. But when I called them, they came after me and they followed me all the way back. I always remember that when I think about the idea of knowing the Good Shepherd's voice, and hearing, and following, and being led to where we need to go.

There is another part of that story, though. The sheep got lost. As we've been going through 1 John, John keeps inviting us to know and show the love of God, while at the same time recognizing that sometimes we struggle with getting lost, with entering into places we don't want to be. Today in 1 John, it says we need to not refuse to notice those in need. It feels to me that in our society today, because there are those who are humbled by hunger and beset by bigotry, and violated by violence, and gripped by grief that we continue to struggle with their experiences. First John is inviting us to notice and to think about how, as we accept God's love, as we recognize Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we notice what's going on around us. In fact, it basically says if you don't notice and help, how can you consider yourself one of the sheep in Jesus' fold?

As we think about those alliterations that I put together, they describe pieces of our society. Humbled by hunger – the poverty that is among us; the kinds of deprivation people feel due to systems and situations and circumstances. We know that people are beset by bigotry – everything from stereotypes that keep people in boxes to racism, which is an issue that has been at the center of our country's struggle over the last 200 years. Then, we are way too familiar with feeling the violation of violence – the mass shootings, the use of force to keep the law, the ways that violence is present in our society. Sometimes we focus on those splashy ways of violence, but yet I think of the nature of domestic violence that is also among us, and how we struggle with it. So we have those issues.

It's easy, particularly at this time, to be gripped by grief. The pandemic has been a grief-producing time, not only engaging us in the inequities evident in the world, making them more evident in some way, but we have also seen the loss of lives due to the pandemic and the way that it has caused people to be isolated and unable to be with

loved ones. We hear stories of people who had been friends, but then their relationship is strain or broken, because they took different routes with how they dealt with risk and caring for one another. Those losses cause real grief.

As we hear 1 John reminding us to see and to think about what it means to help, to reach out, it makes me think about how we need a Good Shepherd. I feel at times like one of those lost sheep trying to figure it all out. I need the voice of Jesus in my life, continuing to call me and to call us to a place where we can begin to see what it means to be his followers.

There is part of this verse that seems pretty difficult to me. It says he lays down his life for us, so we should lay down our lives for each other. It's a pretty dramatic way of talking about mutual caring, and yet it is the description that is used. Perhaps it's metaphor, yet it is metaphor that invites us to see the extent and importance of caring for one another because there is very little that seems more important than laying down one's life. In this we are invited to see the Good Shepherd who lays down his life and invites us to lay down ours, to give of ourselves in the help and care of others.

It feels to me that as we recognize Jesus as our Good Shepherd and ourselves sometimes as the lost sheep, we recognize we need that Good Shepherd to help us see what it means to be good, to find the way. It invites us to believe in the name of Jesus Christ and love one another.

Believe. Sometimes I can think how I can believe something is a particular way without really getting involved in it. But the believing in scripture is to trust, to engage with Jesus in a way that changes our lives and invites us to love one another. It in fact invites us to make it such a priority that it's not just what we think about, but it's what we do. It says to let our love be shown in truth and in action. Another way of saying that is "in reality and in our deeds," in what we do.

It's so easy for me to get caught up in thinking about things and it's a much different thing to actually do things, to actually show God's grace, to exhibit God's love, to do the actions. Because he says, "Don't just do something in talk or in speech, but in truth and in action," it means to me to be thinking about what it means to do it in my daily life as I walk each day with the people I meet, the ways I care. This feels to me like the central challenge of following Jesus.

There are a lot of ways that I grew up that tended to lead me towards isolating. So that's my challenge, to make sure I don't isolate myself, but that I can reach out and I can show the love and grace of God. Each of us will have our own set of challenges because of the ways we grew up, the ways we learned to interact with others. Hopefully, all those were good. But even in a family that I considered as pretty good, I can see my family has its struggles with the way we interact with the world around us. So it's an invitation to see our own struggles because we have a Good Shepherd who invites us to see the good God has given us, the grace God has shown us, the love of

God come to be in our lives through Jesus. In fact, at one point it says to let our lives be so lived that Jesus abides with us.

When I was in seminary, the person who was teaching our Greek class came to that word, abide, and she said, "Well, abide is not quite the sense of that word. You might think about it as living in a house, but it's really more like 'hanging out with,' 'spending time with,' just making it part of our life. So the idea is that we have a Good Shepherd that we get to spend time with and learn from and be guided by.

It's clear to me that I need that Good Shepherd. I need someone that helps me see how I refuse to help. I need someone to show me what sin is: the missed opportunities to do good replaced by actions that do not bring about the will of God, but lead to brokenness instead. I need that Good Shepherd to help me see the difference. I need to trust in a Good Shepherd that I can hang out with, one who wants to be with us, who gives us the Spirit to help guide us, who teaches us to love.

So often it feels like what we are going to learn when somebody teaches us is a better understanding of something. I'm always looking for ways to try to understand. I sometimes think I would be better off if I looked for how I could just love instead of trying to understand, because I'm not sure I can ever fully understand. Yet, he invites us to love, not in word or speech, but in truth and in action. That phrase, to love in truth in action, feels to me like the challenge of the Gospel, the result of the grace given us. Amen.