

sermon-5/3/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“The Model Shepherd”
John 10:11-18 and I John 3:16-24
By Jim Patten

I learned something new this week. Apparently the fourth Sunday of Easter has been traditionally called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” This is the Sunday where we read passages about Jesus as the good shepherd. Psalm 23 is a natural for this Sunday.

The term “good” is one we need to clarify as we focus on the good shepherd. There are two Greek words that can be translated good. The first, “agathos,” uses good in the moral sense, good as the opposite of bad. That is not the Greek word used in our text in John. There we find “kalos.” This term means good in the sense of loving or sympathetic, ideal, or model. John says Jesus is the model shepherd. We are urged to see his life as a model for us.

That is not all that comforting. John affirms that the model shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, for those he loves. He is, of course, referring to Jesus’ crucifixion. If Jesus is our model, then we will have to come to terms with what it means to lay down our lives for others. We will get to that in a moment.

First, we need to ponder another point John is trying to make when he calls Jesus our shepherd. Shepherd is a rich metaphor. People in that day understood that sheep knew the voice of their particular shepherd. They would hear that voice and follow. Shepherds led their sheep, they did not push them from behind like cattle ranchers.

If we take this metaphor to heart, we can’t help but ask ourselves, do we recognize the voice of the model shepherd as it competes with all the other voices in our heads and hearts for our attention? It is critical to recognize Christ’s voice if we are to follow him as his disciple.

The trouble is, sometimes it is very difficult to sort out the voice of our shepherd from all the other voices. It takes work, spiritual discipline even, to recognize Christ’s voice. How might we live in such a way that we would be able to recognize that voice? What spiritual practice would attune our ears to that voice? Are we even willing to give time and effort to those practices? What would we have to say “No” to in order to make that effort? To call Jesus our good shepherd raises those issues for us.

Of course, there is more going on here than recognizing Christ’s voice when we call him our shepherd. We will need to turn to our other scripture passage for today to think about those other issues. Scholars tell us I John is really a commentary on the gospel of John for a new generation. I John fleshes out the implications of the gospel of John for those living well after that gospel was written. Even those of us living in the 21st century can benefit from this commentary.

I John says because Jesus laid down his life for us, we, too, should lay down our lives for one another. Is the author referring to martyrdom? Are we all to be martyrs following the voice of our shepherd into death?

Certainly some Christians have taken that path. From the early Christians martyred for their faith, to more modern Christians like Archbishop Oscar Romero in Central America, or Martin Luther King, Jr. in our country, Christians have literally laid down their lives for others. Their impact has been enormous.

Most of us are not all that thrilled at the prospect of being a martyr. I John recognizes this, so the author gives us an out. I John, immediately after calling us to lay down our lives for one another in verse 16, writes in verse 17, “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?”

The author is saying there is more than one way to lay down our lives for another. One seminary professor said laying down one’s life could mean “going where (we) do not have to go and suffering what (we) could easily avoid.” That certainly expands the notion beyond martyrdom. To voluntarily reach out in compassion, in whatever form that takes, does risk some form of suffering. To do it voluntarily is to recognize we could avoid that pain if we want to live a more self-centered life.

To hear the voice of the shepherd and follow is to choose to risk some pain when we reach out to help another. It is interesting that I John, as one commentator notes, does not ask us to respond to global poverty. No, the author points us to a brother or sister right in our midst. Begin where you are. Respond to the need that comes your way. We don’t have to solve the problems of the world. We just need to see the need right in front of our noses.

The bottom line for I John is action. He is not impressed with those who talk a good line. “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” After all, Jesus was more likely to say “Follow me,” than “Listen to me” or “Believe me.” It is putting our feet and hands where our mouths are that is crucial.

One commentator has said, “You can act your way into a new way of feeling easier than you can feel your way into a new way of acting.” Love is like that. It is not a feeling, at least not entirely. We can’t be commanded to have a feeling. It is more a way of acting that can lead to a feeling. Feelings are often ends in themselves. It just feels so good to love, to be in love. Why spoil that with actually acting on it?

I John wants to affirm it is expressing love in action where we meet God, for God is love. Herb O’Driscoll goes so far as to say the theme song for I John should be the Taize piece “Ubi Caritas” we all sang this past Lent in our Wednesday evening services. (We are going to sing that song following the sermon.) The Latin words are: “Ubi caritas et amor, Ubi caritas Deus ibi est.” That can be translated “Where there is caring and love,

there is God.” You want to experience God? Lay down your life for another in loving acts of generosity and compassion.

Good Shepherd Sunday is all about remembering we should live in such a way that we hear the voice of our shepherd who can lead us into abundant life. It is about following the example of our model shepherd in acts, big and small, where we lay down our lives for one another.

Finally, it is all about loyalty. Walter Brueggemann, probably the pre-eminent Old Testament scholar living today, puts it this way: “It is a mark of discernment and maturity to strip life down to one compelling loyalty, to be freed of all the others that turn out to be idolatrous.” When we follow the example of the model shepherd, when we lay down our lives for one another, when we live in such a way that we hear the voice of our shepherd, Jesus, we are declaring that loyalty.

This Sunday as we take communion, may our coming forward to be nourished by this symbolic meal be a time to reassess our loyalties. May it be a time to move beyond words to putting love into action. May we figure out what laying down our lives for another might mean in our particular context. Amen