

Wesley United Methodist Church

April 22, 2018

“A Shepherd’s Love.”

John 10:11-18

Two television evangelists were talking. One was explaining how he was seeking to be the ideal shepherd to his television flock. “There are three ways I seek to do that,” he said.

“What three ways do you mean?” asked the other evangelist. “Well,” he explained, “First, we FIND them. Every year we find new stations to carry our ministry. Then we FEED them. I give them the plain unvarnished word of God.”

“But what’s the third thing?” asked the other. “Well,” he answered, “Once we find them and feed them, then we FLEECE them!” Some TV evangelists have become quite proficient at fleecing their flock.

I hope you understand that nothing could be farther from the example of Christ. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep...” Fleecing the flock is a long way from laying down your life for them.

Jesus compares the good shepherd with a hired hand. The sheep belong to the shepherd. He works very hard no to lose a single one of them. The hired hand, however, really could care less. The sheep belong to someone else. Why should he risk his life for someone else’s sheep? We’ve all known people who have the attitude of the hired hand.

A paratrooper who had retired from the military was asked how many times he had jumped out of an airplane. He said, “None.” A friend of his asked, “What do you mean, ‘none,’ I thought you were a paratrooper?” He said, “I was, but I never jumped. I was pushed several times...but I never jumped.”

The hired hand never jumps. He has to be pushed. Churches often have hired hands in them. Not our church, of course. But other churches are full of people who have to be pushed to do what they know they ought to do.

Jesus did not have to be pushed. Understand dying for the sins of humanity was not something he relished. He died an excruciating death. But still he did it out of his own free will. He laid down his life for the sheep. That should really speak to us.

In one of his most memorable parables, Jesus compared himself to a shepherd out in the wilderness. One of his sheep had gone missing. He leaves the ninety-nine other sheep under his care to search for that one lost sheep until he finds it. He really does care.

Sheep aren’t the most intelligent creatures in the animal kingdom. Maybe we have overly romanticized the relationship of a shepherd and his sheep.

A letter from a lady who had to deliver seven new-born sheep while her husband was out of town, has this to say. “Never again can I think of the Good Shepherd without knowing that he must love us beyond measure if we are like sheep to him. A sheep is smelly, with an oily kind of dirt that lingers on anything it touches and soaks right through clothing to give an overall aroma long after you’ve come in. One ole ewe that I hate with a passion, since she takes advantage of every unsuspecting moment to assert her authority, had trouble having her lamb. Would you believe we had to pen her up all the while she was trying to incapacitate us...and then wrestle her down and sit on her head before we could pull the lamb? Then she was so exhausted she didn’t want to get up to take care of her baby, so I pretended to get back into the pen with her and she was so anxious to clobber me, she got up with no trouble at all. And that was only one of seven we delivered that week! Thank heaven the others were less traumatic.”

We all have this image of the cuddly little lamb, but adult sheep are not the most endearing of God’s creatures. And the idea of a shepherd giving his life for a sheep is absurd. But Jesus is trying to say to us that this is how absurdly wonderful God’s love for us is. God is much higher above us than a shepherd is a sheep, and, from a logical standpoint, it is absurd that God would love us that much, but that’s the Good News. God really does care for us so much that Christ lay down his life in our behalf.

This brings us to the second thing we need to know about the Good Shepherd. God knows us by name. God doesn’t just love humanity en mas. God loves each of us intimately. God knows our name. Jesus goes on to say, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father...” Here is what’s amusing to me. There are people who have no difficulty believing the creation story, the latest technology and science, but cannot conceive that an all-knowing God can take a personal interest in each of his children, hears each of our prayers, and be responsive to each of our individual needs.

Friends, we’re sheep! No matter how far our technology progresses it will still be painfully primitive in comparison to the mind of the God who created all that lives and moves and has its being. God knows our name. When we come before God to confess our sins and express our needs, God hears our individual petitions and is present with us as if we were the only person in the universe.

One more thing: If you can believe that technology can do all things (well, almost), how can you not believe that the God who made it possible for us to have such technologies, who created the heavens and the earth, and who makes it possible to probe the universe, can be individually responsive to those who call his name?

God really does care for us. God knows us by name. And, God wants to be our partner as we seek to cope with life. Jesus compared us to sheep, and there are times we are sheep. But he also called us his friends, as well as his brothers and sisters. He told us to be yoked to him. He wants to partner with us as we live our lives. So why not let him be our shepherd and let him care for us? Amen.