

WANTED: GOOD SHEPHERDS

4 Easter – B

April 22, 2018

John 10:11-18

What does a good shepherd look like?

The first words of today's gospel, Jesus' own words, tell us that he is *The Good Shepherd*, who lays down his life for the sheep.

But I asked you what a *good shepherd* looks like, because Jesus' ministry didn't end when he died, rose from the dead, and ascended to the Father. Jesus' ministry continues through us. The One who said, "...I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these..." (14:12) commissioned us, *I believe*, to be good shepherds to one another.

That's the ending of this morning's sermon to you. Jesus, the model for shepherding people, expects us to believe in him enough to trust him and follow in his footsteps. At the end of John's gospel Jesus will, in fact, use shepherding words as he instructs Simon Peter to carry on: "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep." I don't believe those words were written down only for Simon Peter's benefit or direction. Reading them, hearing them, means that we, by extension, are called (expected) to do the same: to be good shepherds to the sheep.

Being called and sent is about more than warm fuzzy feelings, though. Just a few weeks ago we marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., who knew that being faithful to God's call meant putting one's life on the line. He knew that speaking truth to power would most likely cost him his life. He knew that when you challenge the status quo, when you question inequality, when you call out the mistreatment of *any* people, there will be some who will be angered. They won't see good news, but a threat to their comfort level. And so you understand Jesus' own words: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." We call Jesus "The Good Shepherd" because he spoke to injustice, worked to bring about wholeness, *and* allowed himself to be vulnerable.

The second reading, from 1st John echoes the thought: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Once that *selflessness* has been laid out for us, the writer of 1st John continues: "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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Dr. King wrote that he feared white moderates more than KKK people because: "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection." What that meant was people who say "I agree you with you, but the time is not right" or "We dare not upset the apple cart" were, by their lack of action, unwittingly complicit with the status-quo: the powers of oppression and suppression.

We can't change the world by waiting for the opportune time to just happen. Nor do we bring about justice by proclaiming that God will fix everything at the end of the age. That is an insult to God and the creation that God called "good." And it certainly doesn't fit in with Jesus' command for us to shepherd one another. Real love doesn't wait. Real love says "I will love you and care about you *because* you and I are children of God."

We value others because God values us enough to call us “good.” Enough to see us as we are—created good, yet imperfect, rebellious, and sinful. Enough to believe that we are still worthy of gracious love that gives up everything, even God’s own Son. God believes we are “worth it.” Who are we to argue with that? God loves *because* we are his. No requirements. No having to earn it.

If that kind of unconditional love is something that is too hard to grasp or get your head around (sometimes we just don’t feel worthy of that kind of love), begin by grabbing an example from your own experience. A parent’s love for a child, or vice-versa, loving your sister or brother, your spouse, etc.: basically someone in your life you would absolutely do anything for, even giving your life.

We love that way *because of* our relationship to them, *because they belong* in our lives, our world. We don’t love them for what they do but for who they are. They are ours, forever.

That’s how God feels about us. We are his forever. God loved us enough to become one of us—God with us. God loved us enough to die for us. And God loves us enough to live for us, because not even death could destroy the relationship. He laid down his life to pick it up again. And to continue the mission. Because his mission wasn’t merely to the sheep of his own fold. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” That said, please don’t lift that one line: “one flock, one shepherd,” out of context as if to say that we don’t need to shepherd each other. Everything Jesus says and does is about “passing the torch to us.”

Also be confident that *you are* up to the task. Rather than say, “I’m not good enough,” remember that Jesus didn’t choose his disciples because of their glowing resumes, but rather because he believed in them. He knew they could learn, be sent forth, and relate to others as they relayed the Good News. He knew that they were capable of shepherding (*being good shepherds to*) one another. In the same way, he believes in you and knows you are up to the call to be shepherds.

So what does *a good shepherd* look like? Just look around. Or look in the mirror. Let God show you. Amen.