

Easter 4B 2021 Sermon

1 John 3:16-18

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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.

John 10:11-18

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

The oldest surviving painting we have of Jesus is found on a wall of one of the catacombs in Rome. It is a painting of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus says in today's Gospel. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And a few verses later, he says it again, "I lay down my life for the sheep."

Now, it's natural for us to hear Jesus say this and immediately think of the cross, where he **will** – literally – lay down his life. And certainly, I think that that meaning is there in the Gospel text. But I also find it interesting that Jesus does not say, "I **will** lay down my life" – future tense; but rather he says, "I lay down my life" – present tense. And the Greek word for "life" that is used here is not *bios*, the word for *physical* life; rather, it is



psyche, which my Greek dictionary defines as “the soul,” “the heart,” “the Whole Person,” “the true and full life that the Creator intends...”¹ The Good Shepherd gives his heart and soul, his true self, his whole person, for the sheep: not just on the cross, but *each and every day*, in the countless, small sacrifices and self-givings which he offers in the daily round of caring for the sheep.

Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the hired hand, who “sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away... because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.” The good shepherd cares **so** much that he is willing to give his life – his whole person – into the life of the sheep; while the hired hand does not care at *all*, and when the going gets tough, he bails.

The British have a term for this: *jobsworth*. A jobsworth “is a person who won’t lift a finger to do more than the bare minimum their job requires. Ask jobsworths to exert themselves and they’ll decline, saying, ‘It’s more than my job’s worth.’ ...A jobsworth... looks out only for [himself] and stays within the narrow confines of his job description...”² He’s the hired hand, who’s only in it for the paycheck.

Now, I imagine that an outward observer, looking from a distance at the good shepherd and the hired hand both going about their duties, most likely would see no difference. For, both the good shepherd and the hired hand lead the sheep out of the sheepfold into the pasture in the morning, and lead them back into the sheepfold at night. The difference lies in their *relationship* with the sheep, which is largely unseen (except to the keen observer). The good shepherd has a deep, loving connection with his sheep, who know him, and he knows them. But the hired hand has **no** connection with the sheep. He doesn’t care.

Now, this Gospel passage raises the obvious question: Which are we? Are we good shepherds, giving our lives, our souls, our hearts, our whole person in loving connection with God and neighbor – pouring out our life for one another in daily self-giving? Or are we hired hands, jobsworths, doing what is expected of us, *looking* like good shepherds on the surface, but without any real connection with God or neighbor at all?

My friends, our world today seems to be coming apart for lack of this kind of connectedness! We are not connected to the earth, with the result that climate change is causing more and more severe hurricanes and fires and floods and sickness and poverty, and enough of the Arctic icecap and glaciers around the world have melted that the earth’s axis has even changed.³ Individualism, which has been a persistent theme running through our American ethos since the founding of our nation, has taken many unhelpful forms in recent years. “Individual rights” seem to win out over the good of the whole; and *division*, not connection, seems to be the law of the land. How could anyone who feels any connection to one’s fellow human being kneel for 9 minutes on another human being’s neck until they die – all the while that human being pleading, “I can’t

breathe”? I cannot imagine that Derek Chauvin felt any **connection** to George Floyd whatsoever: not as a fellow human being, not as a fellow child of God, a fellow American, a fellow member of the Body of Christ, or a fellow sheep for whom the Good Shepherd lays down his life.

And here’s the thing: I think there’s a bit of Derek Chauvin in most of us – certainly in me. For, whenever we consider someone else as “other” than ourself, as someone with whom we have no connection at all, someone we can treat dispassionately as an object rather than a person or a fellow child of God, we are Derek Chauvin.

But, the very meaning of God the Holy Trinity, in whose image we are created, is that at the heart of the Godhead, different persons continually pour themselves out into the other: The Father pours himself out into the Son, who pours himself out into the Holy Spirit, who pours herself out into the Father and the Son and into you and into me. And we join this flow of self-giving, divine love as we participate in the life of God and the lives of one another, with whom we are connected as different members of one Body, as St. Paul so eloquently described. (1 Corinthians 12:1-27)

“To be a person of faith,” writes Richard Rohr, “means we **see** things—people, animals, plants, the earth—as inherently connected to God, connected to ourselves, and therefore, absolutely worthy of love and dignity. That’s what Jesus is praying for [on the night before he dies]: that we could see things in their unity, in their connectedness.”⁴ “Holy Father,” Jesus prays, “I ask... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are **in** me and I am **in** you, may they also be **in** us... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that *they* may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one...” (John 17:11, 21-23) Completely connected.

“The goal of the spiritual journey,” Fr. Rohr writes, “is to discover and move toward connectedness on ever new levels ... Without connectedness and communion, we don’t exist fully as our truest selves. Becoming who we really are is a matter of learning how to become more and more deeply connected...”⁵ “Sin is a refusal of mutuality and a closing down into separateness.”⁶ Sin is a refusal of mutuality and a closing down into separateness.

“If we can’t connect with people of **other** religions, classes, or races, with our ‘enemies’ or with those who are suffering, we’re not very [spiritually whole].”⁴ And in case we don’t believe that, Jesus, the good shepherd, clearly states in today’s Gospel, “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.” **Other** sheep, from other nations, races, political parties, religions – all connected as one flock under the good shepherd.

It is easy to be a hired hand, my friends; easy to be a jobsworth. If the going gets too tough, we simply head for the exit. It's easy to leave, since we have nothing of ourself invested in our fellow sheep, or in the job. There is no caring; there is no connection.

It is *difficult* to be the good shepherd. Sheep are smelly, get dirty, get lost, get sick, become lame, and attract wolves and coyotes. We may begin with a certain level of caring, but then we find ourselves in ever-more difficult and trying situations. Someone told me this past week about a woman they knew who adopted a rescue dog that had been traumatized. It took the woman 2 years to housetrain that dog. A jobsworth would have returned the dog to the pound, withdrawing any emotional attachment she might have initially had to the dog. And who could blame her – having to clean up poop and urine from the carpet every day for 2 years? But rather than being a jobsworth, she was the good shepherd, and laid down her life for that dog. She maintained that loving connection.

The same dynamic is at work on the communal level. It's difficult for us as a **church** to be the good shepherd. Christ Church genuinely responded to Jesus' commandment to "love our neighbor as ourself" by establishing a Little Free Pantry, and offering monthly Laundry Love sessions (among other outreach ministries). But when people vandalized the pantry, and when people tracked mud into the laundromat (making the owner of the laundromat furious at us), it **tested** our commitment to being good shepherds, continuing to care for the sheep. It would have been easy for us to say, "You know, we *tried* to love our neighbor, but it turned out to be more than the job's worth."

But we didn't. At least in those instances, we followed the example of the good shepherd, who – thank God! – has yet to consider us wayward, sinful, disappointing sheep as more than the job's worth.

AMEN

¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1985, pp. 1347-1348

² David Heim, "April 22, Easter 4B," *The Christian Century*, March 23, 2018

³ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/weather/topstories/earths-axis-has-been-shifted-by-climate-change-study-says/ar-BB1g2chi>

⁴ "Living in Heaven Now," Richard Rohr's Daily Devotion, Friday, March 12, 2021, <https://cac.org/living-in-heaven-now-2021-03-12/#:~:text=To%20be%20a%20person%20of%20faith%20means%20we,see%20things%20in%20their%20unity%2C%20in%20their%20connectedness.>

⁵ "Community as Alternative Consciousness," Richard Rohr's daily meditation, Monday, June 1, 2020, <https://cac.org/community-as-alternative-consciousness-2020-06-01/>

6 “Made for Love,” Richard Rohr’s daily meditation, Monday, April 30, 2018,
<https://cac.org/made-for-love-2018-04-30/>