



Sunday April 25, 2021
John 10:11-18 (Fourth Sunday of Easter)

Pastor Tony Acompanado

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

One day a shepherd was looking after his sheep on the side of a deserted road, when suddenly a shiny new sports car drives up and screeches to a halt. The young driver, gets out and asks the shepherd, "If I can tell you how many sheep you have, will you give me one of them?" The shepherd looks at the young man, and then looks at the large flock of grazing sheep and replies, "Okay." The young man proceeds to connect his laptop to his cell phone, logs in to a NASA network, scans the ground using his GPS, opens a database of Excel tables with logarithms, and then prints out a 50-page report on his high-tech mini-printer.

He turns to the shepherd and says, "You have exactly 1,586 sheep here." Rather surprised, the shepherd responds, "That's correct, you can have your sheep." The young man takes an animal and puts it in the back of his car. Just as the man is about to drive off, the shepherd asks him, "If I guess your profession, will you return my animal to me?" The young man answers, "Sure, why not?" The shepherd says, "You're an IT consultant." "Yes, how did you know" responds the young man. "Very simple," answers the shepherd. "First, you came here without being called. Second, you charged me a fee to tell me something I already knew, and third, you don't understand anything about my business...now, can I please have my dog back?"

I have a confession to make – when I first read the gospel text for today about the Good Shepherd, I cringed a little bit, because truth be told, I find the Good Shepherd text difficult for several reasons. And, I probably should have recognized something was off when a few months ago Pastor Chris and I were dividing up the preaching schedule and he was quick to ask if I wanted to preach this Sunday and when I said yes, he exclaimed loudly, "Oh, Thank God!"

On one hand, the metaphor of a shepherd, although found throughout Scripture and an image that would have been extremely familiar to our Gospel writer's listeners, is one that's simply unfamiliar to me and most modern-day hearers. On the other hand, I'm also quite aware that I have no real-life experience of what Jesus was talking about when he described himself in terms of shepherds, sheep, hirelings, and wolves.

Jesus was no doubt an effective teacher partly because he used metaphors his audience could relate to. When he spoke of sheepfolds, vineyards, mustard seeds, and fishing nets, he was speaking the language of first century peasant life. But I've never herded sheep much less even met a shepherd, nor have I ever fought off any wolves in my life.

So, I came into this week's readings a bit weary on the one hand, and ignorant on the other – and I struggled. But amid my struggling and wondering, as I read and re-read today's readings side by side, the whispers of the Holy Spirit became increasingly louder, and a persistent theme continued to arise – love. And this, I do understand...at least I think I do.

We all know or think we know what love is and how to love...right? And we all know that we should love one another, don't we? After all, as Christians that is what we're called to do, isn't it? And yet, in reality should and do are two very different things.

Let's face it, we live in a world where resentment, anger, grudges, and violence dominate. Just look around, daily we hear story after story of people not being loved – people are neglected, killed, divorced, marginalized, bullied, cast aside, terrorized, abused, discriminated, profiled – and it happens to everyone. It doesn't matter if you're at home, at work, in school, or out in the world. And since we're laying everything out there, let's not pretend that things are always glowing in the church either.

At times it seems that our world is so overrun with an aversion to anything that isn't like us or the way we want it to be that our default is either to detest all that opposes or offends us, to desire the worse for those who harm us or to just turn and look away before we get discouraged or cynical.



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So, what are we to do then, and where are we to turn to see and experience what real love looks and feels like? Because if we're being honest about the sources that bombard us each day with images of so called "real love" – social media, reality tv, pornography, and even some of our relationships with family or friends – they often fall short and disappoint us.

Well, it may seem like the answer should be obvious, especially for those of us sitting here, but too often we're either looking in all the wrong places, or we just don't see it, much less follow it. The answer is so simple and so evident, and yet we miss it in our constant desire for the quick and easy. This happens to be one of those times in the church when the default answer, the automatic go to, can and should be Jesus – because he not only taught us what real love is, but more importantly he showed us.

In our reading today from 1 John we're given the answer, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us." This is God's love in action. This is the kind of love the world needs to know. God's love is intimate and active, it's committed and personal, it's gracious and inclusive and it reaches far beyond the depths of human emotions and demands a deeper commitment of placing oneself aside for something greater.

And if we're called to look to Jesus as our example, what shape then does God's presence take in our lives...if any...or at all? What might our lives and our world look like if we were to love not merely in words or sentiments, but instead in truth and by our actions?

How would our lives and the lives of those around us be different if our actions were rooted in the same selfless love shown to us by Jesus? What would our world look like if in everything we thought and said and did, we began with "how do we care for one another? How would things be different if we actually lived out our call to love and serve our neighbors?

If we want to learn how to love other people, then we have to stop searching for it in worldly examples when all we need to do is follow the life of Christ, because if anyone ever proved the truth and depth of their love for others it was Jesus. When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he was showing that he loved them. When he fed the crowds and taught them God's Word, he was revealing love to them. When he forgave the woman caught in adultery while others wanted to condemn her, Jesus was proving love.

Every time Jesus served, ministered, welcomed, healed, or preached he was demonstrating love. And of course, every time we gather for worship around this table of grace, and we hear the words given and shed for you, we are reminded of his greatest act of love.

My friends, we learn what real love is and how to love because God loved us first through the boundless commitment and sacrifice of Christ. Love is the very essence of life, and God commands us to follow the example of Jesus, not out of a sense of obligation, but rather so that we and those we love might experience life as God intended. So, if we want to "live," and I mean truly live experiencing all the blessings of joy and abundance that Jesus speaks of, then we must choose to love – and not in a superficial, surface kind of way, but to love with the same intimacy, compassion, grace and inclusion as Jesus loves.

This love that we're called to live out is not an emotional one, but one that comes from the transforming of our hearts and minds. It's a practical love that is experienced by both the self and the other – it's a love lived out in ways that always cherishes the other. It's a love that seeks justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace – for all. It is the love of a Good Shepherd who lays down his life for those he loves and by the grace of God, may we all learn to live and love in such a way. Thanks be to God. Amen.