

The Shepherd
John 10:11-18 / I John 3:16-24
Colebrook Congregational Church
April 26, 2015 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

One of my ecclesiology professors, in a discussion on the role of pastors, suggested that we not think of ourselves as shepherds, even though the title “pastor” is derived from shepherd. He said, “You are not the Shepherd, Jesus is the shepherd. You are more like the sheep dogs. Because you guys make a lot of noise.”

Both of our lectionary selections are attributed to John the Evangelist, his Gospel, and one of the three Epistles that bear his name. Some scholars think that they were written by different people because of certain stylistic differences. However, I think that they can be, because they tackle the same issues and the language written was from the same time period, and those stylistic differences can be explained by taking into account that one would write in a certain way for a Gospel, which would be different from how one would write a letter. Also, the Gospel was meant to help convert unbelievers into Christians; two of the Epistles are letters from a believer to other believers, and one Epistle is a sermon. One should expect style differences.

The same issue that both address is that heresy I talked about last week, Docetism. You can see throughout the Gospel of John that the community is in pain, having been expelled from the synagogues in the area of Ephesus. Later on, in the First Epistle of John, which is really a sermon and not a letter, we see that the community is in pain again, because their churches have split over whether or not Jesus was human. So the purpose of the First Epistle is to encourage the remaining church members to remain faithful and reject the roots of the errors of those who left.

The Fourth Sunday after Easter is called “Good Shepherd Sunday” where many churches reflect on how Jesus is the Good Shepherd who has laid down His life on the cross for His flock. Because of this, I have been meditating this past week on the connection between the Gospel and the Epistle selections. While the Psalter and the Gospel are explicitly about a Shepherd, the Epistle is not. The Epistle invokes a similar type of imagery at first, but I wondered if there was a stronger connection.

It turns out, that a lot of my moments of clarity and divine inspiration happen on sunny days, while I walk through a parking lot. I don't understand why the Spirit descends to move me at those times more often than other situations where that happens, but it does. What It moved me to realize is that the connection is responsibility.

In the Gospel, Jesus is the Good Shepherd and is contrasted with the hired hand. The Hired Hand does not take responsibility for the flock, and he runs away at the first sign of danger. He abandons the flock to the wolf, scattering the sheep and snatching some of them. He does not care about the flock, and he lacks responsibility. The Good Shepherd is the opposite. He knows who His sheep are, and they know Him. He will protect them, He loves them, and He will lay down His life for His flock if needs be. Jesus decided to do this, to take up the responsibility for the flock. Even knowing what He was going to go through, He still took responsibility.

It's like Yoda. Yoda was abandoned and mistreated. He had gone through a horrible experience, and yet, Yoda decided he would take responsibility for the kittens; guiding them, helping them, and protecting them. When one of his flock was missing, Yoda went looking for the lost kitten. No matter what danger the lost kitten found herself in, Yoda was there to save her. Yoda provided a safe place for his kittens to sleep. Yoda is very much like the Good Shepherd.

Then there is the Epistle. We are reminded by John the Evangelist of what Jesus called the Greatest Commandment. We are reminded of Jesus' love for us, and we are challenged to respond to His love for us with love for others. This is where I see the responsibility, where in the Gospel it is Jesus taking responsibility for us, here we have to respond to the Good Shepherd by taking responsibility for our faith by loving our neighbors. If we see someone in need and we have the ability to help that someone, then we must. Otherwise, God's love cannot abide in us. It is the love not found in word or speech, but in truth and action. Furthermore, all who obey the Greatest Commandment, to Love all, can know that in doing so, we abide in Jesus, and then He will abide in us. We know this by the Spirit, which He has sent

to us, moving our hearts.

I have a dear friend named Ariana who may be the most altruistic person I know. I met her at a convention, when I was trying to carry a bunch of artwork from my car into the convention center and I was having a bit of difficulty. She ran fifty yards just to hold open the door. Then she helped me carry in boxes. Then she ran to help someone else. She checked in a lot with me to make sure I was properly settled. Whenever I saw her for the rest of the event, she was always helping someone with something.

Theresa & I decided to bring her with us to other events, and the same thing happened. She was always running around finding people who needed help in some way and she would volunteer. It's what made her happy. She doesn't have much, she's usually in need herself, but she spends so much time being selfless, and I find her very admirable. She truly exemplifies what John was talking about.

According to John the Evangelist, if you have the means to do so, you cannot turn away from someone in need. If we are moved by the Spirit to follow Jesus the Good Shepherd, then we are challenged to respond to his Love for us with our Love for others. However, you cannot just say, you have to do. That is taking responsibility for your faith in the Good Shepherd who has taken responsibility for all of us.

Amen.

Prayers of the People

[PAUSE]

Loving God, you have called us to follow in the way of your risen Son, and to care for those who are our companions, not only with words of comfort, but with acts of love. Seeking to be true friends of all, we offer our prayers on behalf of the church and the world. We pray for all in the world who need you; for healing, for comfort, for safety and security. We pray for the courage to be your messengers of your Good News by providing for the needs of our neighbors. We pray for those who serve us, in our community and abroad, keeping us safe and seeing to our needs. We pray for caregivers, guide their hands and hearts to accomplish great deeds in the service of others. We pray for your guidance, lead us & help us to make the right decisions in our lives. We also ask that you remember those who we keep in our hearts, especially:

Guide us in the path of discipleship, so that, as you have blessed us, we may be a blessing for others, bringing the promise of the kingdom near, through our words and deeds. Amen.

John 10:11-18

10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

10:12 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.

10:13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

10:14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,

10:15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

10:16 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.

10:17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

10:18 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."

1 John 3:16-24

3:16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

3:17 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?

3:18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

3:19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him

3:20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

3:21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;

3:22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

3:23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

3:24 All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.