**Into the Fold**

**Easter 4, April 25, 2021**

I John 3 16-24

John 10: 11-18 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This week, the City of Regina Community Wellness committee considered a [report](http://reginask.iqm2.com/Citizens/FileOpen.aspx?Type=1&ID=4230&Inline=True) that recommended the Mayor right a letter of support to the federal government regarding [Bill C6](https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/LegislativeSummaries/432C6E) which seeks to ban what is called gay conversion therapy. [Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgender conversion efforts](https://www.noconversioncanada.com/) and practices are abusive and harmful, denying the full humanity of 2SLGBT folk as it has a view that only heterosexual and cis gender, or birth gender, are normative and acceptable. There were 26 people representing organizations such as churches and individuals who presented to the committee. Some of those speaking against the report raised concerns about human rights of those wanting to seek this so-called therapy, and concerns about limiting counsellors’ ability to have conversations about sexuality and gender identity with those who are exploring. The Committee also proposed (and passed) an amendment directing city administration to develop a by-law banning 2SLGBT conversion efforts in Regina. Some of us who spoke from welcoming churches, emphasized the importance of being from a congregation and having a faith perspective that welcomes 2SLBGT folk who have often been rejected and hurt by the Christian Church. Too often the evangelical conservative church voices get the media attention and creates the impression that theirs is the only Christian view. Nothing could be further from the truth and as a result we need to be more explicit and public in our welcoming message of love, to speak to those who have been rejected and excluded by the church.

Jesus, the good shepherd, in our passage today, talks about bringing sheep into the fold who are not included, so that there will be one flock. Jesus is talking about caring for all, and bringing all together in unity. It means reaching out to all, loving all and caring for all. Being a shepherd in Jesus’ time was a tough job, working in areas of sparse growth, in danger from wild animals and sheep stealers. Shepherds were viewed as one of the most dishonest and despised trades. Yet they performed an important role that Jesus upholds. Sheep are short-sighted, only being able to see six feet in front of them. They can be known to get lost, six feet at a time – straying from the flock to the greener grass six feet away, then another six feet, then another. The shepherd has to be constantly watching to keep the sheep together – to maintain the one flock. It may be interesting to consider what ways might I, might you stray, six feet at a time?

When we are attentive to our faith and God in our lives, then that straying can be noticed and addressed. Sometimes a friend might notice and call us to account. May we recognize the Christ in them and their actions. Jesus, as a good shepherd works to herd us in and call us back. He talks about the difference between a shepherd who owns the flock and a hired hand who only cares about the money and really doesn’t work hard to care for and watch over the sheep. The context of this passage is that Jesus has just healed a blind man, on the Sabbath and the Pharisees were questioning the blind man about who healed him and how. They were more concerned about the law than the fact that a man was healed. Thus, Jesus is linking the hired hands to the Pharisees who do not care as much about the flock as they do the rules to keep the flock, or the people, in check. Who are the hired hands in our lives, in this present time? Could it be the management of companies who [awarded CEOs](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/24/business/ceos-pandemic-compensation.html) millions of dollars during the pandemic while their companies struggled? Could it be the government leader who is more concerned about keeping the economy going than keeping people safe during the pandemic? Could it be the principle who is more focused on administration than the children of the school? Could it be the church member who withholds money because they are upset about something in the church? Could it be the police chief who is more concerned about maintaining the police budget than listening to or addressing the concerns of Black Lives in his community?

Sometimes a hired hand may be seen as indifferent, as long as they get paid. Indifference can also be as much a sin as making a bad choice or having bad judgment. This week we were blessed to have Laura Stewart and Grant Gilchrist speak to us about their advocacy work on climate change and the things they have done in their own lives to try and make a difference. Laura is also a songwriter and wrote a song inspired by her participation with students in the Friday School strike protests. The song is a dialogue between youth and adults. The first verse says: (sorry I can’t sing it for you!)

She said, “I’m not gonna live to die of old age.

I’ve been reading what the scientists say.

Me, I’m gonna die of climate change.”

I said, “When you talk like that,

the folks just turn away,

back to their cars, their jobs, their habits,

back to their headphones full of static,

sayin’, Don’t be so dramatic.”

She said, “I need them to panic!”

Sometimes our indifference can come across as defensiveness to change or challenge. It is too easy to stay on the course we are on, without evaluating its impact on the world, on others. We learned from Laura and Grant that while it is important to explore the ways we contribute to climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, and what changes we can make in our lives, the biggest differences that can be made is in industry and politics. So what are we doing to convince politicians and industry leaders to change? We are called to be accountable at all levels in our care for one another and the earth. This is part of being a faithful steward and a good shepherd.

The passage in I John, speaks of love and the type of love we are called to embody as followers of Jesus. The passage begins naming how we are to lay down our lives for others, similar to how Jesus talks about how he and the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. This is not about sacrifice but love which goes the whole way in the interest of others. The passage continues to describe the importance of considering the well being and needs of others. Indeed, there is a challenge that if we have worldly goods or wealth and we do not share it with those in need, then we are not living in love. This also connects with a passage in Ezekiel 34 which is an important link to the Good Shepherd passage. The prophet Ezekiel is calling out the leaders who are being poor shepherds saying: “you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves. Shouldn't shepherds feed the sheep?” Ezekiel is condemning the leaders for the lack of care for the poor, and those in need in the land. Later in the passage, God identifies as the true shepherd who will rescue and care for the people. Living out God’s love includes engagement with a world in need with all its complexities, political, social, and otherwise. Too often, as we focus on a personal faith, this is missed and there is an overemphasis on eternal life after death. This can lead to a situation summed up in the phrase, that *we can be so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good*. We are called to be engaged in the world, to address the needs here of the poor, the oppressed, those who are excluded and live in a loving response to the injustice we are aware of and experience. Our personal faith and spirituality need to be strong and nurtured to feed us for the mission and ministry of addressing injustice in our communities and the world. So, as we seek to spread God’s love and respond in love to those in need, regardless of who they are, we are caring for the sheep, the one flock. We are all shepherds and called to care for the community, knowing them at the deepest level possible, as a shepherd knows his sheep.

This means that we are called to know the needs of our diverse community, as we seek to bring those into the fold who have not felt included or welcome. There should be no barriers among us as Christians - racial, economic, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, ability or any other barriers. As a congregation working to live out what it means to be an Affirming Ministry it involves not only understanding what it means to be intentionally welcoming of those who too often feel excluded and marginalized, but being public and explicit about it as well, as we did this week at the City committee. We are working toward being good shepherds who seek to bring into the fold those who are on the outside. These days, this includes [understanding racism, white privilege and white supremacy](https://www.racialequitytools.org/resources/fundamentals/core-concepts/system-of-white-supremacy-and-white-privilege). It is not just about saying I am not racist, it is about being anti-racist and understanding the pervasiveness of racism. One of the thoughts I had in reflecting on the message of a good shepherd laying down his life for his sheep, and what that means for us, was what would it look like for us to lay down our life of white privilege, and truly challenge racism? For those who are racialized, consider how you might fall victim to the system that denigrates you and your community, through internalized racism for example. This may be who and what we are called to do and be in these times. Are we ready for that? As we work to address white supremacy in the church, it will be challenging and it will be important and the church will be different. If we want to survive and become a more diverse community, then we will need to be prepared to explore these issues and explore how we may need to change to be open to receiving the communities who have previously not found a home in the church. May we be open to truly receiving all, to continue learning together as community what it means to be a community of faith, and reach out to others as we seek to be shepherds of all children of God, both those in our community and those outside of it.

As we move through this Easter season and beyond, let us be aware of the good shepherds among us and encourage one another in love, that we may not get more than six feet away from the flock. May we seek to learn and be more aware of how our individual actions have global impact. May we reach out in love to all around us, seeking to live out Christ’s peace and compassion to those in need, as we continue to work to create inclusive community. Let us go forth to give our lives in love that others might live – or as one expression goes, live simply, that others may simply live.