

John 10: 11-18 "Recognizing the Good Shepherd" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/2/21

Many years ago, a pastor was preparing a sermon on Christ as the Good Shepherd. Being from an urban area, the pastor knew nothing about sheep or what it takes to shepherd them. He stumbled upon a newspaper article about a modern-day shepherd who had opened a large sheep operation. The farm was within a reasonable driving distance, so the pastor phoned to ask if he could visit and have a conversation. The shepherd welcomed the pastor, drove him onto the expansive grasslands where the flocks were grazing, and explained to him the rigors and challenges of raising sheep. One of the most common frustrations was finding lost sheep. When a sheep wandered off, the shepherd got on his cell phone and alerted his fellow shepherds. Each of them got in their pickups and scoured their assigned areas of the grasslands until the animal was found, thrown in the truck, and returned to the flock. If, however, the same sheep wandered off a second time, it was not returned to the flock. Instead, the creature went straight to the slaughterhouse, because, as the shepherd explained, it takes too many personnel hours and too much fuel to keep finding an animal that consistently strays away. So sheep beware: You wander twice and the shepherd slaughters you because it is the efficient thing to do.

It is a wonderful thing, therefore, that the Shepherd in our scripture is the exact opposite. Instead of wandering sheep getting slaughtered, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. It is not an efficient way to run a business but it is certainly a sufficient way to model God's grace and love. We are a generation who desperately needs such a shepherding model. Some of us have spent a great deal of time in our lives without someone who took the time to lead us with grace and selflessness, with honesty and integrity. Recently,

we have been bombarded with media images as well as leaders who operate out of revenge, intolerance, judgment, and selfishness. The Gospel of John describes for us a leader who establishes a community where we are embraced and known, where even the hairs on our head are counted, where we matter so much that even if one of us wanders off at sunset, the Shepherd will come looking for us until he finds us and brings us back into the fold. The Shepherd does this through the many shepherds placed all around us, entrusted to care for God's flock. A minister was trying to teach this concept in a children's moment sharing that each of them were like sheep who needed a shepherd every day in their lives. He explained that shepherds were all around us, that in fact, there were shepherds right now in the people these children saw at church. He asked who is like a shepherd to them, hoping some of the kids might point out one of their teachers, leaders, or even himself. Instead, one of the kids boldly proclaimed "Jesus, Jesus is like our shepherd." The minister, not wanting to lose the truth there, said, "Right and what can I be or your Sunday School teacher be as well?" The child thought for a moment and said, "You can be a sheepdog."

Every day I come to work, I am reminded of the shepherds who care for preschoolers next door as I hear the kids laughter in the playground next to our parking lot. I hear words of encouragement, guidance, and caution come across the fence and say a prayer of gratitude for those who seek to teach by their examples. The role these shepherds play is vital to the development of young children. To them and our educators, we entrust our most precious possessions. We say we appreciate what they do but like the shepherds of old, we consider them necessary but not terribly important in the world's terms – not powerful like a general, CEO, NFL draft pick, or media mogul. These workers are not our heroes or heroines, maybe not

even our role model, but it was with the low class, poor shepherds that Jesus chose to identify. One of the few benefits that has come out of the pandemic is a renewed appreciation for people who lay down their lives for others, who spend their days working for the abundant, full and free life for all, rather than pursuing the temptations of wealth, power and prestige. We see it in health care workers, firefighters, and law enforcement, but we also see it in the day in, day out laborers who bus our tables, pick up our garbage, deliver our mail, cut our hair, and pack our groceries. Over the past year, they were shown to be invaluable at the services they performed – abundant living which was missed when it wasn't available. Almost unnoticed, so many work diligently with few resources, giving of themselves in order to nurture the environment around them and the people who are under their care. We witnessed those who took the shepherding model to the extreme and they are the ones that society is most suspicious of in these tenuous times. It was remarkable to see witnesses from law enforcement positions on the stand in the Derek Chauvin case who went against the grain and spoke up for accountability, not a popular view among some of their peers. It reminds us that those who choose to be life-givers, who choose to place truth over rumors, who sacrifice for the common good even if it means nay-sayers seek to remove them, there will clearly be misunderstanding, and suspicion unleashed on them just as it was for Jesus. Some may even wonder about their sanity, but if the church is to give leadership at such a time as this, perhaps it is the day-care model, the shepherd model, that serves us well.

Philip Potter, former general secretary of the World Council of Churches was once asked to define the characteristics a church leader must possess in order to help others deal with all the serious issues of our world. He said solemnly, "If you are to be a leader in this time, you

must have a screw loose, you must have a death wish, and you must have a sense of humor.” Not what people expected but he went on. “To have a screw loose,” he said, “is to be open to the movement of the Spirit in your life – not to have life so carefully planned out that the Spirit can’t gain access. To have a death wish is to be clear that the choice to be a shepherd is to reject the crown for the cross. And to have a sense of humor is an absolute necessity to ward off the devil, for the devil never laughs.” It gives us a new understanding of what it means to follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd.

One of the most incredible stories to come out of the tragedy of the grand ship, the Titanic, was about Wallace Hartley, the son of a church choirmaster in England. Hartley had left the prestige and wealth of being a banker to pursue a career in music. He conducted and played violin and worked some 80 maritime voyages before joining the ship that, as legend had it, even “God himself couldn’t sink.” The 33 year old Hartley was so good looking and invested in discovering new music to introduce to his passengers that he got the nickname, “Hotley.” He and his musicians became the stuff of legend as the Titanic was sinking, because they kept on playing. Like many of the details from that fated night back in April, 1912, accounts of the episode vary but historian John Maxtone-Graham indicates the best sources swear the band played inside at first, then moved outdoors, “where there was no piano, no light, no chairs, no music stands, and they played on that cold outer deck.” In a time when death seemed imminent, Hartley didn’t abandon his post. He was a minister tending to his flock. The musicians focused their minds on the beauty of the music as it calmed the passengers. Hartley took care of the band’s spiritual needs near the end of their lives by giving them a job they

could do which most likely gave as much comfort to the musicians as it did to the people who heard them.

A young woman named Hannah started youth group because she had nowhere else to be on a Sunday night. She was adopted as an infant, her parents divorced in her junior high years; her mother was diagnosed with cancer while her father was busy creating another family that didn't include her. The youth group was all she had, and not everyone in the group was gracious with her because she had a serious chip on her shoulder. The night her mother died, I drove her home from the hospital and she looked at me and said, "Who is going to take care of me now?" Not long after, she disappeared and no one knew where she was. It wasn't until 2 years later, that I received a note that said simply, "Thanks for being there." And I was reminded that God's grace is sufficient to keep us coming back from all our wanderings to say to the shepherd, "Thanks for being there. Thanks for being here. Thanks for letting me in."