

“A Flock that Resembles Its Shepherd” based on 1 John 3:16-24 and John 10:11-18
Delivered on April 25, 2021 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Last Sunday, we were driving back from North Carolina, and yet somehow we were still here in worship with you. It is truly remarkable that because of this pandemic, we have modernized so much, that now we are able to broadcast the proclamation of God’s word in this church to just about anywhere in the world, anywhere with Facebook access.

And so, I hope you enjoyed Leo’s sermon as much as I did. Over the past three years, Leo and I have had great talks, and his hunger and thirst for God’s word is truly amazing. He has not only studied scripture deeply, but has taken on things I read in seminary, and some I never tackled, in his free time just for fun. So, I want to build upon a couple of lines from his sermon last week, because in this season of Easter, the lectionary readings build on each other, as we move ahead to that incredible moment of Pentecost in a few more weeks.

I got excited in our car hearing Leo say, *“Behavior matters, but bearing God’s image, through our vocational calling, is more than just ‘right behavior.’ If that is not the case, we have put the knowledge of good & evil, before the knowledge of God, again.”* This is great stuff. Thank you, Leo. Of course, what he didn’t say, but is there, is that this points us to the garden of Eden, when humanity in the presence of God, chooses knowledge of good and evil. They choose control of these, over the love of God.

But as we discussed in the covenants this Lent, that despite our desire to be the boss, we know God has never given up on humanity. God gives us the ability to love and God gives us our own will to choose what we love in our life. The example of Adam and Eve at the tree is to choose power and control over relationship with God, but the example of Jesus dying, hanged on a tree, is God giving up power and control and choosing a relationship with us.

That is the message of both John’s gospel and this letter of John. Each one is explicit about testifying to who Jesus is as one with the Father and Spirit, and each one is explicit about us, as readers of John’s words, being inspired to testify ourselves to the presence of Jesus in our lives today. By our words and by our deeds, by laying down our whole life, who we are, our identity, our status, our possessions, our prerogatives, our lives, just as God in Jesus laid everything on the line for us, not because God had to, or was required to do it, but because God loves us and wanted to do it. Indeed, God loves you and wants you.

Growing up, my mom had a saying that summarizes our readings today. She said, “Love is doing.” By this, she was not saying to me or my siblings that obeying her was something we needed to do in order to earn her love. She meant that for me to do what she asked was how I could express my love for her in return. Indeed, this is how it is with God – Our moral behavior earns nothing. No quantity or quality of good deeds can ever earn the love of God. No, as the gospel of John 3:16 famously says, *“God so loved the world, he sent his only begotten son, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but shall receive eternal life.”*

And so today, we have 1 John 3:16 and it goes so well with it, *“By this we have known love.”* Indeed, the gospel and letter reveal for us the humble and vulnerable character of God, who, despite being the creator of all things and the only truly immortal, eternal being, stepped into creation to live as we live, became mortal and temporal as we are. This is who Jesus is. This is the One who was crucified and rose for us. He died and rose, not because God needed humanity, but instead, because God chose humanity, because God loves humanity. And from the beginning, God has committed to us.

And so, John writes in the letter, *“By this we have known love: Because he laid down his whole life for us.”* – This is God’s love in action...for us. The God who created all things, entered into our limited existence...for us. Indeed, in Jesus, God laid down for us God’s power and identity. As the Apostle Paul said, he was emptied to take the form of a slave and became obedient to the point of death on a cross. We are a creation God could have just destroyed and re-made, yet, God offers redemption for us, not at our cost, but at God’s cost – humbled to be human, and humbled by death on a cross.

Now, maybe if I were God, I would have looked at this broken world and just crumpled it up, and then I would have tossed it into some cosmic trash can, and then started all over again. I don’t know why God would even share with us God’s ability to love and give us control or sovereignty to love. And I’m not sure why God in his redemption process, would want us to share in his work in the world. A supreme authority, we might think, should stamp it and make it so. Except that perhaps the glory of love is something more. It’s not a feeling or obligation, but a free choice to express love, to give it and to receive it.

And so, we know love because God in Christ died for us, and so, 1 John 3:16 rightly says that we ‘ought,’ in response, lay down our whole lives, who we are, our identity, our status, our possessions, our prerogatives, our lives, just as Jesus did, and truly accept God’s love as we look upon yet another tree, the cross. The next verse puts it into perspective, because if we recognize this love and embrace it, then how could we have a livelihood in this world, often translated, *‘the goods of this world,’* and yet see a sister or brother in need and close off our hearts to them. And then have the audacity to try to say that we love God or have accepted God’s love?

Little children, John writes, we should not love as a word, a rationale, a philosophy that we speak, something we talk about in theory. And we should not love with our tongue, meaning just give ‘lip service’ to our love, with empty words of love. But we should love through our actions and truth – testifying to who Jesus is. Indeed, just as my mother, Dorothy Mangione used to say, *“Love is doing.”* When we do acts of love, and get outside of serving our own needs, and instead serve others, that is when we reveal what we think of Jesus. This, not a feeling we have, nor emotions in our heart. This action and this truth are our assurance, that we are not only loved by God, because everyone is loved by God, but when we act in response to God’s love, that is when we abide, or live in that love.

Our morality and our good deeds are not needed by God to accomplish God’s will. The cross has already done that. Yet our morality and our good deeds do reveal God’s will at work within

us. God's commandment is that we should have faith in the Son, in Jesus, and that we should love one another, just as Jesus commanded. You see what John is doing here is merging the humanity and divinity of Jesus and saying that God in our flesh gave us a command to love, indeed, to love one another as Jesus loves us, which means laying down our lives, our will, what we want, just as Jesus laid down his life for us.

Friends, remember, you cannot be commanded to have an emotion. You can't be commanded to feel something, those things just happen. So, therefore if God is commanding us to love, then to God, love is not an emotion; it is not a feeling; it is NOT our desires. No, the love we are commanded to have is the faithful decision to be patient and kind, not arrogant or rude. Love is to be humble about our own sinfulness and repentant, turning to God and having our minds changed, so that instead of excusing our sins, while at the same time judging the sins of others, we might bear, believe, hope and endure all things together as a community of those called out by God.

This is what God in Jesus did for us and it is our calling to love one another as Jesus has loved us. None of this, which I have said is about being perfect, but about knowing you are loved. This week, Gay our Administrative Assistant shared a video with me which I shared on our Facebook page. It's of a boy finding a sheep stuck in a ditch. He pulls the animal out of the ditch, and it goes bounding off in utter joy because it has been set free, and then, bam, a little farther down the way, it gets stuck again. It is submerged in the ditch and in need of the boy to save it. The boy just starts walking up the trail to it, presumably to do the same thing all over again.

Friends, this indeed is like our walk with Christ. We see in our gospel reading that Jesus says 'I am the Good Shepherd.' He declares himself to be the shepherd who is promised by the prophets, the Messiah, and, I think, he is declaring himself also to be the Shepherd of Psalm 23, the Lord. This is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, for us, and as the Psalmist writes, the one who 'follows us with goodness and mercy,' or better still in the Hebrew, who 'pursues' or 'runs after' us with goodness and with mercy, meaning God's covenantal love, all the days of our life, so we can dwell, remain, abide, in the house of the Lord forever.

Jesus is not some hired hand, like an earthly king. He is God's own self who pursues us, and when we realize that we are sheep in the flock of a God who loves us, we become a flock that resembles this shepherd. It's not all the time. We fall into ditches and need rescue, but we repent and turn to him. We return to the good shepherd and when we know we are loved, we respond by doing what we have been commanded to do.

My sisters and brothers, the Good Shepherd loves you, and is calling you – Listen for his voice. Lay down your life, your identity, your status, your possessions, your prerogatives, your everything, and follow him. For the Lord is your Shepherd who laid everything down for you. And by his death and resurrection, you can pick up your life in him, to be a minister of reconciliation in this broken world, in order to be a flock, a church, individual sheep gathered together who resemble him. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*.

John 10:11-18 (Pastor's Translation) I am the Good Shepherd. The *Good* Shepherd *lays* down his whole life for the sheep. And the *hired* servant, who, not being the Shepherd does not own the sheep, *sees* the *wolf coming* and *leaves* the sheep and *flees*. And the wolf *steals* and *scatters* them, because a hired *servant* is not *concerned* about the sheep. I am the Good *Shepherd*, and I know my own, and am known by *mine*. As the Father knows me, I also know the Father, and I *lay* down my whole life for the *sheep*, and for other sheep, which are not of this *fold*. It is necessary *likewise* that they will *hear* my *voice* and there will be one *flock*, with one Shepherd. On *account* of this, the *Father loves* me, because I lay down my whole *life* in *order* that I might receive it. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down myself. I have *authority* to lay it down, and I have authority again to *receive* it. This *commandment* I received from my Father.