

“Shepherd Is A Verb”

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Psalm 23

John 10:11-18

[Jesus said,]

"I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'

John 10:11

Let us pray... O God,

Help us learn the balance we need between what it takes to get along in this world
and enough to be good shepherds, too.

Amen

A child was visiting a friend who had a pool
and he couldn't wait to get into the water and try out his new diving mask.
Just like Mike Nelson in "Sea Hunt", he put the mask on and jumped in,
but it wasn't on tight enough and the mask slipped down over his mouth
and began to fill with water.

"Mike" could swim, but he was in the deep end, over his head,
and panicked as he struggled to get out of the mask and the pool.

His mother was standing at the poolside, talking with his friend's mother –
who suddenly noticed something was wrong and said,
"Your son is in trouble!"

His mother leaped into the water and came up under him, to push him out of the pool,
but the child's frantic efforts to hold on threatened to drown them both.
Sheer determination prevailed as child and mother made it to safety.

Basic water rescue techniques – to keep in mind if someone is drowning, involves
reaching out to them from a secure position yourself,
preferably on land and with a stick or a float for them to grab.
Or if you are in the water with them,
wait till they get tired and stop thrashing before you reach out to help.

The same holds true for being a good shepherd.

You both don't need to drown in the process of helping somebody in need of help.
The trick is in knowing what is *enough* – though in Jesus' case, that meant
jumping in all the way without counting the cost
because it would take spilling his blood to break the vicious cycle
of the "name, blame, and shame" game.

But for most of us, 'enough' is about smaller sacrifices that are in our power to do.

To be a shepherd is to be available to help keep the flock together
and to be a good shepherd is to care enough to jump in with both feet
when that's called for.

The word 'shepherd' – in that regard, is also a verb.

Willard, p.2

There are some inspirational slogans from the 1960s and early 1970s that still ring true and have something to say for our time.

I remember a poster with a quote by pop singer Janice Joplin that said, "You can't compromise yourself, because you're all you've got."

There was a book title by Malcom Boyd that provides a wonderful image of Christ by simply asking this question, Are You Running With Me, Jesus?.

And there's a song title with a simple message also from that time

by folk singer and Episcopal priest William Flanders – it's called,

'Love Is a Verb' which gave me the idea for today's sermon title, 'Shepherd Is a Verb'.

We hear the word 'love' bandied about quite a bit –

which can be used to justify and support a wide variety of activities.

Perhaps we see it as a "thing" itself – as a noun;

But to say, "Love is a verb", implies a challenge to us to see that 'love' – or compassion or loving-kindness, is something we do.

When the resurrected Christ met Peter on the beach,

he asked three times if Peter loved him.

And three times, Peter said, "Yes" – but then Jesus urged Peter the Fisherman to take care of the lambs and feed his sheep .

Or as it says in the New American Standard Bible [translation of John 21:16b] –

'Shepherd My sheep.'

'Tend', 'feed', 'care for' – aren't these all ways of saying that 'to shepherd' is also 'to show love'?

In traditional societies, a shepherd's job was to keep a flock of sheep together so they could be shorn of their wool at the end of the winter season.

A shepherd was usually a family's younger child who couldn't help with harder work or an unmarried man from outside of the family.

A "good shepherd" would be somebody who took an interest in the welfare of the flock beyond just getting paid to do the minimum.

And that meant making sure the flock had good pasture to eat and defending them from predators or thieves.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses imagery of shepherds in parables and many of the heroes of the Hebrew Bible were shepherds –

not only King David, but Abraham, Joseph, and Moses.

There are no parables in the Gospel of John,

but it is filled with rich metaphors like Jesus' 'I am' sayings which include Jesus saying, 'I am the good shepherd.'

Willard, p.3

It is one of the most important images of Christ along with those of him crucified, praying in the garden, seated at the Last Supper, feeding the 5,000... though no where does it say in the Bible or anywhere else that he actually worked as a shepherd.

Still, Christ as the Good Shepherd is one of the first visual portrayals *about* him that were used by the early church to teach about who Jesus was – and is, to the Christian community.

Traveling with the Lancaster Theological Seminary ‘Arts Ensemble’,

I had the opportunity to visit many churches throughout Pennsylvania.

And I took note of the images of Christ to be found in their sanctuaries.

Many of the churches were from the E&R tradition

where the Evangelical Church’s love for images in stained-glass superseded the austerity of the Reformed Church.

I found the overwhelming theme of decorative windows and pictures on display was that of Bernhart Plockhurst’s Jesus as “The Good Shepherd” –

with Warner Sallman’s familiar “Head of Christ”, a close second.

The last church on our tour was in Baltimore beside an interstate road

and the sanctuary had a modern design such that the whole back wall was glass so people driving by could see a service of worship in progress.

There were no other images in the sanctuary except banners –

so their ‘image of Christ’ was whatever the congregation was doing anytime they were gathered there.

And that’s the image I want you to carry with you today –

not only of our God as Christ who identified with humble Third World peasants like a sheep herder,

but that we are to take on the role of ‘shepherding’ in our lives and jump in at some level.

Being a teacher comes readily to mind, but so do nurses and doctors, as well as clergy – and the word “pastor” come from a Latin word that means “shepherd”.

And we shouldn’t overlook the obvious like people who work with animals – veterinarians and farmers who indirectly minister to people as well.

Add to that list... administrative assistants in any office – especially churches, CPAs at tax time, as well as police, firefighters, and the military.

Though most of you are retired, you can still make a point to check in on a neighbor.

You can become a ‘shepherd’ yourself for other members of this congregation – something I’d like us to talk about as a church.

Willard, p.4

In big or small ways,

to do what is enough – to love, is all it takes to be a good shepherd

and reflect the image of Christ who likewise reflected the character of God.

And to shepherd others – is like the way love is a verb,

and that's to do what Christians should do.

So, be available, stay on firm ground if you can,

but don't be afraid to jump in and do what is enough.

Amen

*Psalm 23 is one of the most recognizable scriptures of the Bible
and beloved prayers of the Christian faith.*

*It recalls the tradition that King David composed the Psalms himself
and had been a shepherd himself as a boy.*

If you know Psalm 23 by heart, please say it along with me...

[1] The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

[2] He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.

[3] He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

[4] Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

[5] Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

[6] Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

John 10:11-18

[Jesus said,]

"I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

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.

The hired hand runs away

because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd.

I know my own and my own know me,

just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.

And I lay down my life for the sheep.

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.

For this reason the Father loves me,

because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

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."