

The New Community: Shepherding and the Sheep

John 10: 11-18

1 John 3: 16-24

We continue our consideration of what the community forming and living in the light of the resurrection was all about. Today, we drop the reading from Acts and pick up a reading from John's gospel that focuses attention on the nature of the Good Shepherd as Jesus explains himself and his role as Shepherd to the sheep. Sheep and shepherding will become an issue once again in the last chapter of John's gospel when Jesus makes a resurrection appearance to Peter and challenges him to become the Shepherd for the sheep.

The sheep and shepherd metaphor works well when Jesus is seen as the Shepherd and the disciples are seen as the sheep. In this sense, we can easily see ourselves as the sheep.

However, the dynamic changes when Jesus is no longer in his earthly role. Who is the shepherd now? And just as importantly, who are the sheep? And for our self-interested perspective, are we sheep or shepherd now?

The difficulty of this question is evident in the stilted John 21 exchange between the risen Jesus and Simon Peter. In this odd dialogue, Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Peter responds three times by saying, "You know that I love you." And three times, Jesus replies (with minor variation), "Feed my sheep." Jesus ends the Q and A with a rebuke of Peter, apparently not happy with the response, or better – lack of response – given by Peter when summoned to "Feed my sheep." What is missing in this three-fold back-and-forth is Peter affirming that he will become shepherd to the sheep.

Peter doesn't want to be the next Good Shepherd, it seems. Since the guy who was in the job of Good Shepherd is standing before him, after having been crucified, and having said that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, Peter doesn't want to be the next one on a cross. Yet Jesus's rebuke to him makes it clear that there is such an outcome in his future, like it or not.

As I've said previously, Jesus's instructions to his disciples basically amounted to: "Follow me, and do what I was doing." It's maddeningly simple, and at the same time, it isn't at all simple.

Turning to John's gospel, we should note that most of chapter 10 has Jesus speaking about his role as the Good Shepherd. He begins the monologue by talking about thieves and robbers of sheep. The shepherd is the watchman who guards the gate, who keeps the sheep safe and secure from such predators. The sheep do not follow the predators because they know the voice of the shepherd and follow him. It closes with: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Our passage is concerned with the hireling who is not truly committed to the protection of the sheep, who flees at the sight of the wolf, abandoning the sheep. The hireling's indifference puts the sheep at risk.

Interpreters spend a lot of time talking about the sheep, the Shepherd, and the hireling, but hardly mention the wolf. Since it is a metaphorical play of images, you might think that some effort would be made in understanding the wolf, too. Not so.

One clue may be to look at the passage that likely inspired this whole metaphor, Ezekiel 34, which surely served as a model for what was produced about the sheep and the shepherds in John's gospel. There the prophet Ezekiel repeats God's word, prophesying against the shepherds of Israel – the kings and generals and elites. They've exploited the sheep, in essence consuming them, as it says in 34:3: *You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.* We don't hear explicitly about the wolves, but it comes close in verse 8 as God's frustration with worldly shepherds comes to its peak: *My sheep have become prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep ... I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.* By the end, God declares that God is taking over, that God will become their True or Good Shepherd.

From Ezekiel 34, we can tell that the predators are the ones who have no genuine interest in the sheep apart from what they can take from the sheep for their own benefit. They don't care about the sheep and dispose of them as soon as they've gotten all that they can from them. That sounds like it could apply to wolves, doesn't it?

Thanks to Ezekiel, we can fairly identify the wolves as the ones who prey upon people, upon situations, upon organizations, using opportunities to exploit, extract, and extort whatever they can for their own benefit, even if it's harmful or, yes, even fatal. Sheep are expendable and disposable, only existing to serve the present need of the empowered; nothing more.

If we have a better grasp of wolfish behavior and attitude, we see the opposite portrayed in the passage from 1st John. Following a major theme in 1st John, the passage is concerned with understanding the dimensions of precious and sacrificial love that characterize Jesus and should characterize Jesus' followers. We said last week that such love should see all of human creation as family, seeing ourselves as children of the Creator *and* surrounded by brothers and sisters who are also beloved children of the Creator.

That sacrificial love – *agape* love – is directly opposite what we just reviewed regarding the wolves. The wolves would never lay down their life for another; they are in the role of taking resources, taking life, possessing all that they can **for themselves**. Jesus is the one who lays down his life, which is then followed with the instruction, *we ought to lay down our lives for one another*.

That's the first tough one for us. It's one thing for Jesus to lay his life down for us; it's a whole other thing for us to lay down our lives for each other. Oh, we'd do it, of course ... right?

It answers the question of who is the shepherd in the resurrection community. Those who follow Jesus are called to be shepherds, just like Peter. And that would include us.

If we're the shepherds, then we can't be sheep, too. Who are the sheep?

That takes us to the second tough one for us. *If anyone has worldly possessions and sees his brother [or sister] in need, but has no pity ... how can the love of God be in [them]?* In case there are any weasels reading the passage closely, it is implicit that one would **share** those worldly possessions to benefit and minister to one in need. (A literal reading might suggest that "pity" alone was sufficient. Nah-nah.) The author regards such a failure as indicative that God's love means nothing, that God's grace is unappreciated. It means that this sister or brother of means is, in fact, estranged from God, out of good relationship and standing, not really a serious follower of the Lord at all. Would it be too harsh to call this one a "wolf"?

I mentioned to the Sunday School class how a teller at our branch a couple of weeks ago got presented with a deposit of \$200,000 in cash. That would be well over a foot wide stack of hundred dollar bills. The woman who brought it in drove up in a Ferrari. The money was so that her husband could buy his own Ferrari. The woman called in advance to say she was coming with this pile of cash. Why anyone would carry around such a pile of cash is still a mystery, but I think has to do with making an ostentatious statement that you can do such a thing. Many in our society would be awed, even envious of such a display of wealth – spending \$400,000 for a couple of cars. But no one is likely to cry out, "Wolf!"

After emphasizing love must be expressed **not** in words and posturing, but with real actions and genuine concern, John explains how this reflects whether the believer "belongs to the truth." The next phrase is another tough one; *and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and God knows everything.* Here, "if our hearts condemn us" is an expression that seems rather odd. Somehow we're lacking in good and worthy spirit and conduct as followers of the living Lord, but we set our hearts at rest before God, because God is greater than that. Okay, that sounds good; God is greater than our sinfulness and would graciously minister to us, I guess.

But verse 21 says: *Dear friends, if our hearts do **not** condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask.* What just happened? How can it say that if our hearts **do** condemn us, it's okay – God will take care of it, and if our hearts **don't** condemn us, it's okay; we have confidence before God? Something isn't quite right.

It turns out that the first expression - *we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us* – applies to those who are self-judging harshly and finding fault unnecessarily; folks who are overdoing it and being scrupulous. Those folks' self-condemnation gets overturned by the love and justice of God. Then, if we aren't messed up by scrupulousness, the text says: *we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask*.

The passage concludes with a two-fold command: to believe in Jesus, and to love one another as Jesus commanded. Sounds familiar.

The shepherd is defined by love, not mere kindness or affection, but sacrificial *agape* love, a Jesus love that is gracious, that brings life.

The wolf is defined by taking, seizing, exploiting, and by death; the wolf has a sinful disregard for the life and well-being of the other whose only purpose and presence is defined by the wolf in selfish and self-serving terms” what do I get?

Our passages point out the difficult proposition of following Jesus, our risen Lord. As his love was sacrificial, so as shepherds, our love for one another must reflect that sacrificial love. As his love led him to give all things for love of God and love of the sheep – his sisters and brother, so our love as shepherds must stand with the sheep – the weak, poor, vulnerable, and excluded – defending against the wolves.

We aren't accustomed to thinking about love this deeply and costly. And we aren't accustomed to standing against wolves. More like the hireling, we're apt to run for cover when wolves show up. We aren't accustomed to genuine sacrifice as an act of faithfulness and devotion. We like the other stuff, the religious fluff that's less demanding and much easier. We like casting the wolf as Satan, a spiritual force beyond our reckoning, not as one of this world who can be named and must be challenged. We don't like naming the wolves that stalk the sheep in our own society. But they're ever present, and quite successful.

We're reminded that the only weapon of the faithful follower of the Lord is not the crook or the staff, the strength or the conviction, but the sacrificial love of Jesus that overcomes and conquers to bring justice, peace, and new life for all. It's the sacrificial love that we, as shepherds of the Lord's sheep, must offer faithfully.