

“Good Sheep”

New London UMC

Worship on April 21 & 22, 2024

John 10:11-18; I John 3:11, 16-24 *NRSV*

Rev. Joyce Rich

I know that many of you have children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. I have a question for you: Does being a good parent guarantee that you will have good children? (*input*) No. There is no guarantee that will be the outcome. Each child is going to be a unique individual – capable of making both good and bad decisions. That’s just how it is. But you can learn to accept that, because even when you don’t necessarily love what they choose to DO, you can still love them. And if you love someone, you are going to love them even if they reject your expressions of love for them, or if they don’t notice or appreciate the sacrifices you make for them. YOU can still choose to value how much you love them, and continue to act on that love.

Now based upon your own experience, I want you to try to imagine what it would be like if you were Jesus the good shepherd. You take your role of shepherding so seriously that you thoroughly get to know each of your sheep and what they need, and are committed to always protecting them at any cost from all threats and danger because you love them and want them to be safe and healthy so they can live full and abundant lives. Why you would freely lay down your life for them! . . . But do you think that being such a good shepherd guarantees that you will have good sheep? (*input*) No. That outcome is not guaranteed.

With no guaranteed outcome, what compels Jesus to nevertheless continue to be a good shepherd? Do you think it is Jesus’ love for the sheep that compels him – in much the same way that your love for your kids and grandkids compels you to willingly continue to pour yourself into being a good parent and grandparent? Love makes you do it. And obviously you already know that what you lovingly DO for someone can say, “I love you” – perhaps louder and clearer than just speaking those words to them. Even though it can be a very good thing to hear someone tell us, “I love you,” we still seek confirmation of the *truth* of their love through everything else say and do. Genuine love has matching words and actions.

Just as your love for your kids and grandkids is evident in the pairing of what you say and do, our love for God is also evident in the pairing of what we say and do. When we allow God’s love to abide in us, and flow through us, what we say and do are shaped by love. When we abide in God’s love we look at the world through loving eyes. When we abide in God’s love we stop and take the time to help someone who is overwhelmed. When we abide in God’s love we anticipate the needs of other people – and prepare accordingly. When we abide in God’s love we set aside what we could say next in order to first give our full attention to listening to what someone else is saying. When we abide in God’s love we offer a cup of cold water on a hot day, or some soup on a cold day, and make sure there is something for everyone. When we abide in God’s love we see who is lonely or in pain, and who needs to have their hand held, and who needs to be held in prayer.

When we abide in God's love we speak up when something is wrong and needs to be changed, and we intervene when someone is being harmed or mistreated. When we abide in God's love we see, and do, and say things with the strength and gentleness of God's love. We freely give our love as God has freely loved us. We freely choose to abide ever more deeply in God's love. And because we make these choices, we are able to begin to understand the fine distinction that Jesus draws when he says:

*"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."*

*(John 10:17b-18a NRSV)*

Taking and giving are not the same thing. And there is a huge difference between having one's life forcibly taken, and lovingly choosing to give one's life. But the love that we know through Jesus' choice of giving his life is a love that is already familiar to us. It is the love of God which we know not just in word or speech, but in truth and action. This love of God floods our hearts and fills our lives to overflowing. It is this love of God that we choose to abide in, and which shapes our thoughts, our words, our actions into one complete love.

By a show of hands, how many of you also learned how to sew your own clothes and were taught how to use a pattern? (*input*) Whether the pieces of the pattern were printed on thin tissue paper, or we took an existing garment and deconstructed it to have separate pieces to work with, we needed to choose how to lay the pieces of the pattern out on the cloth before cutting them out and sewing them together. The laying out of the pattern is a very important step in a sewing project. It can make or break the finished garment. If the pattern isn't correctly lined up with the grain of the fabric – the sewn garment will not hang, drape, or flex properly. The final outcome is shaped by the initial layout.

Jesus decided how he would lay down his life with the final outcome in mind. And in this way, Jesus became our pattern. We know that the "Jesus pattern" is shaped like a cross. That pattern was completely laid out and cut out at one time; then sewn together into new, resurrected life in three days. While there will be some people who will closely follow this pattern and choose to totally lay down their lives all at once; I think that there will be many more of us who will choose to lay down our lives in love for others piece by piece until the pattern is complete.

What do I mean by choosing to do this "piece by piece"? Let me explain. During our lives there are moments when we can see that by making a personal sacrifice we can help shift a situation to head toward a better outcome. For example, if we happen to know a gifted student who has been offered a full-time academic scholarship – but is going to have to decline it because they can't afford to pay for room and board and books and supplies even with a part-time job – we can offer to bridge that gap with funds saved by cutting back our own living expenses. We can choose to take that cut for them. . . . Or if someone we know will have a long recovery time from surgery and needs someone to

provide caregiving – or needs a more accessible place to live during their recovery – we can set aside our own plans, or rearrange our own home, to care for them. We can choose to put their needs ahead of our own. . . . Or if we are grocery shopping we can choose to tithe our shopping by picking up one food item for the food pantry for every nine food items we buy for ourselves. We can choose to eat less so that others can also eat.

We are following Jesus' pattern if we make such everyday sacrificial choices and if each separate piece of our lives is laid down with love that shares with others our abundant life with God. May we continue to choose to follow Jesus' pattern and to abide in God's love.

Amen.