

**“Love to Death”**

**New London UMC**

**Sunday, April 25, 2021**

**Psalm 23; John 10:11-18; I John 3:16-24** *NRSV*

**Rev. Joyce Rich**

A biblical commentary on our reading from the Gospel of John contained a snippet that I thought you’d find interesting. It reads: *“Cows can be pushed; sheep must be led.”*

*(Nancy R. Blakely, p. 450, Pastoral, Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2)*

I hate to say it, but I think this biblical scholar has never tried to push a cow that didn’t want to move – and perhaps never watched a sheep dog work sheep. And if you think of your own experience with trying to move any animal along, you may recall needing to employ a number of techniques in the art of persuasion: be it pushing, pulling, begging, bargaining, bribing, commanding, or even physically picking the animal up. Sometimes it can seem like a test of wills to get an animal to move. And at other times there can be a harmonious shared understanding that achieves smooth and untroubled movement. . . . I would say that a lot depends on the situation and the kind of rapport or trust that has developed between the human and a particular animal, or with a whole herd.

In general, HOW someone treats an animal, or a herd, is important. Animals, much like people, respond better to respectful or gentle handling than to harshness. And we know that the provision of good food, attentive care, and pleasant surroundings can make for happy and healthy animals and people. This is echoed in a short article by shepherd Craig Rogers (posted on the website [modernfarmer.com](http://modernfarmer.com)). He notes that a shepherd or shepherdess needs to “tend to the flock, but care for the individual.” While it is very important to meet all the basic needs of a flock: food, water, health, and safety; the ultimate “success of a shepherd or shepherdess is in the compassion they have for each individual.” Each sheep needs to be seen and known as a distinct individual – and not just numbered as part of the flock. A good shepherd or shepherdess will care for each of the individual sheep within a flock, and understand how each of the sheep typically interacts with the other sheep in the flock. . . . And if someone takes the time to develop that kind of depth and breadth of knowledge, skill, and compassion for a flock, it shows that they are committed to the sheep and to being the best shepherd or shepherdess they can be.

When we hear Jesus talk about the difference between being a “good shepherd” or a “hired hand” who tends the sheep – we know that he is also talking about the difference in how they “tend to the flock, but care for the individual.” Jesus describes the “hired hand” as one who runs away when they see a wolf coming because they put their own health and safety above that of the sheep under their care. The “hired hand” will only tend the flock with minimal commitment and compassion for the sheep. But a “good shepherd” would not only know and care for the sheep so well that the sheep would automatically recognize and respond to the shepherd’s voice, the shepherd would also want to lay down their life for the sheep in order to protect and defend them.

Jesus not only consistently acts as a “good shepherd” who tends and leads the flock with love and compassion for each sheep in his fold, he also cares for “his sheep” that are outside of the fold, and desires that all of the sheep will become one flock, with one shepherd. And in pursuit of this goal, Jesus willingly laid down his life for ALL of the sheep – and then willingly rose from death to new life. It is Jesus the “good shepherd” who lovingly and compassionately leads the way for all of his sheep to be saved from sin and death, to enter into new life with him.

In the First Letter of John we are encouraged to follow Jesus’ example of devoted love and compassionate care in how we live with each other. Like Jesus the “good shepherd” we can commit to knowing each other so well that we can pick-up on the signs of something being ‘off.’ To know when there is a marked or subtle change in how people are communicating; or if behaviors have shifted; or if the number of interactions between people have gone up, or down; or if there is an unusually high level of anxiety or fear. And because we care enough to notice when something is ‘off’ – we are also motivated to respond with loving action to both tend to the health of the flock and offer compassionate care for each individual.

Mutually tending to our flock by caring for each other requires responding to a lot of observational input. Over the past year this has been complicated by the lack of time we’ve been able to spend together, and by simply not being able to see as much of each other as we’re used to seeing. I think we’ve all discovered how much we actually rely on seeing everyone’s full facial expressions, and how we interpret what’s going on by how our bodies occupy the space we’re physically in. The combination of facemasks and social distancing has challenged and troubled us. It used to be that you knew if people leaned in toward each other in conversation they were engaged and involved in what they were talking about; and that if they backed off, or moved apart, or looked away, they didn’t want to be involved in the conversation. But now we need to consider whether someone is making a political or professional or personal statement by how far apart they stand when they talk to other people; or if they do, or do not, wear a facemask when they are in a public space. It makes mutually tending to our flock with loving care that much harder for all of us to do. But we still need to do it. First John reminds us:

*And this is [God’s] commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (1 John 3:23-24 NRSV)*

If we love one another, tend to the flock, and care for each individual – surely we will know goodness and mercy all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the fold of the Lord forever and ever. Amen.