

“Being Shepherd”
Text: John 10: 11-18

Prayer: Shepherd God, loving Mother, open us to your words of life so we may fully understand the depth and width of your love. Amen.

It was time for supper, but I still would like to play more with my friends. Who could possibly want to leave when I’m playing hide and seek with my friends? Just then I heard that familiar voice. My mom is calling me for supper! So I ran as fast as I could because we have a rule in the house. If you are the last one to sit at the dining table, you will do the dishes! I’m sure, like me, you have many fond memories of your childhood, especially those that connect you with the familiar voices of your mom or dad or family members or very close friends who care for you. And when you hear that familiar voice – you know how to respond accordingly - and you don’t want to disappoint that person!

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we are again drawn to the familiar imagery of Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John. It was the same imagery of our Shepherd God in Psalm 23 who provides for the needs and one who cares and protects the sheep from danger. As the Good Shepherd, we are familiar with some artistic depictions of Jesus holding a lost lamb over his shoulder and his other hand holding a staff. There was also a beautiful stained-glass window which depicts Jesus wearing a beautiful, clean, white, flowing robe, holding a cuddly little lamb in his arms. The lamb has a look of total love on its face, and another sheep is looking on with eager anticipation, waiting her turn. The background of the picture is pastoral and serene--rolling green hills and puffy white clouds and no visible sign of trouble anywhere. Here is another version of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (show the banner). Whichever depiction of the Good Shepherd we have seen, all of them capture our attention as if hearing that familiar voice of Jesus telling us “I am the Good Shepherd!”

Many of us here have farming backgrounds and fewer still have ever actually related to sheep or shepherds in our day-to-day existence. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is an icon that some of us tend to romanticize even without really understanding what it means. We look at paintings or stained-glass window art and we think – wow! what a peaceful, serene landscape this is! We have no clue whatsoever of the dangers and the struggles the shepherd

and the sheep might have encountered. We have no idea how the life of the shepherd has been challenged so many times just to make sure the sheep are in a good place – safe and secure – grazing on green pastures and quenching thirst in still, fresh waters.

Shepherds, in Jesus' times, were one of the marginalized groups of people. Yes – they are needed, but not always respected, for the work they have to do. They belong to the ranks of peasants. Most of them work for a landowner or a rich farmer. Their job description requires leading the flock to feed on green pastures, seeking strays before they fall victim to predators, and accounting for the well-being of the whole flock to the owner. The ancient law was such that if a shepherd lost any of the sheep to wolves, thieves, or carelessness, the shepherd was personally responsible for replacing that which was lost. Shepherds were even expected to literally lay down their lives for the sake of their flock. All this makes the gospel reading even more remarkable as a metaphor, as it shows Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as a caring companion on a difficult journey in the life of his flock. The sheep are completely dependent on the shepherd and on the shepherd's sense of responsibility and love for the flock. Jesus is a shepherd who won't go home to rest until he knows all the sheep have entered into their rest. A shepherd, who, even when he is dead tired, gets up and continues looking and calling until the sheep are all safely home.

Jesus as the Good shepherd holds for us a challenge of how we might think about loving and caring. Like a good parent, particularly mothers, the shepherd is the one who gives from an unselfish, undemanding, unconditional heart. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, embraces a selfless life within the practice of community until he dies. And at the same time, he didn't gloat over his giving. There was no sense of self-righteousness about his life. He was serious about laying down his life so that others might live. Jesus taught us to be both good shepherds to one another.

In a sermon preached by Rev. Anthony Bailey, used an illustration of a true story that happened in the Middle East, of a conversation between a journalist visiting that place for the first time and an Arab shepherd who does not have a single clue to the Christian scripture. The Arab shepherd was asked to describe what he does which could help us understand the image of Jesus as the Shepherd. At night, the shepherd gathers the sheep in a pen that has an open gap. Once he gathers them in, he also makes sure that the sheep are in good physical condition. He checks

for bruises, or wounds that need to be looked after or things that need healing. When the journalist asked if a gate was put in the open gap to secure the sheep's safety, the shepherd's answer caught him off guard. The shepherd claimed – “ no – there is no gate closing the gap because I am the gate! I lay down across that gap in the pen to make sure that the sheep were safe. The sheep will not trample over me because they recognize who I am. And they know my voice. Any threats or danger that comes to the pen would come to me first.”

Mothers and shepherds are both in the “tender, loving care” business. They take their responsibility for the welfare of their charges seriously. Mothers are shepherds. Mothers do not love any of their children more or less than others. A mother would stop at nothing to protect her children—even the ones who are rebellious and difficult. Nobody loves like a mother. An old-schooled preacher used this illustration in his sermon on Mother's Day: “When a mother has a sick child, it is marvelous how quick her ears become while attending it. Good woman, we wonder she does not fall asleep. If you hire a nurse, it is ten to one she would. But the dear child in the middle of the night does not need to cry for water, or even speak; there is a little quick breathing—who will hear it? No one would except the mother; but her ears are quick, for they are in her child's heart.”

Yes, a mother has to be many things and endure many things. They are on call 24/7 365 days of the year. They are cooks, chauffeurs, doctors, event planners, gardeners, housekeepers, conflict managers, teachers, and the list goes on, never seeming to end. It's God's love that nudges and empowers mothers to nurture, protect, teach, mold someone or something with the earnest desire to change the world. An unknown poet declares that a mother's love is something that is made up of a lot of deep devotion, joy, pain and sacrifice. It is endless and unselfish and it endures whatever may come. It is full of hopes, dreams, tears and pleasure. Nothing can ever destroy it or take that special love away. It is very patient and forgiving.

We tend to think of mothers as meek and mild, in the same way that we think of shepherds who just walk around in pastures moving sheep around. But neither of these images are remotely accurate. I can't speak for anyone else's mom, but my mom—while she can be mild at times—is far from being meek, particularly when she's upset about something. But her love for her children is far beyond description. She would make herself last in every situation.

My mom, now approaching her 92nd birthday, is not very energetic anymore, but she remains loving, caring, genuinely giving and appreciative of what she receives from her family. When a shepherd has to use the crook to get a sheep in line, it is not always gentle, not abusive; deliberate, not out of anger or spite, but out of love. Loving Mothers are like Good Shepherds. When mothers have to get stern with their children, it is not from rage or a deep-seated anger; it is out of love.

I find it so difficult to reflect on this passage in John when the larger community and the world is beset with social-political interruptions, discouraging moments or questionable violence. It is so hard to decipher who in the world we should look up to as Shepherds and what kind of sheep we are becoming? What kind of danger threatens our community? What does our individual family struggle with? How do we in this faith community address those dangers or struggles? If Jesus, our leader, was our Good Shepherd, what kind of flock should we be?

Dear friends, it is no secret that our world is in chaos. There seems to be more disorder than order that we can never imagine. But the truth is this. We are loved. God the shepherd, like a loving mother, is seeking us. Listen for the Shepherd's voice. While it might seem like the noise and clamor of this world are drowning out the Shepherd's voice, I assure you, they cannot and will not; the only thing that stands in the way of hearing that voice is our choosing not to hear it. This I know for sure – if all the world's shepherds will follow the example of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, then we are certain that all the sheep will be in good hands and this world will be a better place! Amen.