



“The Good Shepherd”

John 10:11-21

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Third Sunday after Easter

It is probably no surprise to you that adults living in long-term, stable, loving relationships live longer, are healthier and happier than other people. It seems that happiness, a sense of well-being, is not the result of success or money. Rather, happiness is determined by the quality of our relationships. Most of us know that, though we have difficulty not believing that more success or money will make us happier.

It may surprise you to know that communities, cultures, and nations with “high social trust” have happier, healthier people, more efficient government, and less fear of crime. It seems that communal well-being is also the consequence of quality relationships. The relevance for business, government, neighborhoods, and churches — to say nothing of families — is clear, often dreadfully so.

Christians should not be surprised that the quality of relationships determines the quality of our lives. By creation, we are deeply relational beings. That’s why Jesus summed up all of life and faith simply, “Love God and love your neighbor.” The quality of our lives, our families, and our communities depends on how well we love God and each other.

Conversely, broken relationships break people, families, communities and society. When relationships are predatory, exploitive, adversarial and self-centered, when we value what works over what’s right, and are willing to destroy others to improve ourselves or our group, we are broken and need repair.

And the fact of the matter is, none of us loves God or our neighbors sufficiently. We are, as Luther put it, bent in on ourselves. We are broken and need repair. Our world is broken and needs healing.

To put it in the language of our Gospel Lesson, we need a Good Shepherd who will care for us, love us, repair us, and heal our hearts. God, the one who made us and loves us infinitely, has taken the initiative and come to us in Jesus Christ who said, “I am the Good Shepherd.”

A few minutes ago, we read the 23rd Psalm together. Its familiar words evoke powerful images in all of us. In art, music, stained glass windows, Sunday School lessons, at funerals, or somewhere else in our lives, nearly all of us have been deeply touched by those potent words and images. It tells of an alternative world that coexists with this one, a place where God comes into our brokenness to be with us, to heal, restore, and encourage. Even in the familiar but outdated language of the King James version of the Bible, it holds deeply evocative power: that is, it creates what it says:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters.

He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake
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.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The world needs a good shepherd. Life on this planet is not what it ought to be, should be, can be. Nations wage war, corporations exploit their employees and nature in the pursuit of profit, governments lie, cover it up, and forget the common good; leaders appointed to be good shepherds are, in fact, bad shepherds destroying life rather than nourishing it – I don't need to go on. Living, being a family and raising children is difficult, complicated and often dangerous. The world needs good shepherds.

We might deny it, but we know better. We need a good shepherd. Think of a mom and her toddler daughter walking down the street. Deep in conversation, the little girl instinctively reaches up and places her hand in her mom's hand. She needs someone to care for her, teach her, comfort and nurture her.

A number of years ago, I was in a small group of people talking about things important to us. One young man, recently widowed, told of driving through the desert west at sunset. He described the beauty of that sunset then, voice breaking, said, "but I had no one with whom to share it." He knew he needed someone to love, care for, and share life with. He needed a good shepherd.

You can learn lots on the subway. Last week I was on a crowded subway car when an elderly couple got on. The man was a bit wobbly. People made way for them to sit. As they sat down, the woman instinctively reached out to take the man's arm and help him sit down. He needed and received a good shepherd.

We have a good shepherd. The one who made us, loves us and desires us, is a good shepherd. That Good Shepherd sent his son Jesus Christ to be our Good Shepherd. In our gospel text, Jesus boldly declares, "I am the Good Shepherd." He stands at the center of this congregation and welcomes us into his care. "I know my sheep," he says, "and I know their names. They know my voice."

In a thousand ways, he calls our name. The question is whether or not we hear his voice. If you were here last week, you may remember Jesus' last words to Peter. "Peter, do you love me?" Three times he called Peter's name and asked, "Do you love me?" Each time Peter answered, "Yes," three times Jesus told Peter to share that love with the world. "Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs. Care for my flock."

In the garden on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene wept with a broken heart. The one she loved, who'd healed her and made her life make sense, was dead, and worse, his body was gone from the tomb.

The Risen One came to her and said softly, "Miriam." She recognized his voice when he called her name. Like Peter, her life changed in the sound of his voice. Oh they still had their lives on this planet. But new life came, and along with it, a spring of well-being that transformed it all. No matter what, the Good Shepherd was with them to care, help, restore, heal – to give them the experience of God's shalom.

After Easter, the disciples all heard him call their names, and as he instructed them, they formed a community entrusted with God's shalom and commissioned to share it with the world. What Jesus taught — the presence of eternity in time and space and in them — was embodied in a community of shepherds and sheep. A new way of living in mutual care

and concern was born. The Good Shepherd was with them – and they, in turn, became good shepherds to each other.

The Epistle Lesson in Acts is a portrait of that communal care and concern. Tabitha was her name in Aramaic. She was also called Dorcas, the Greek translation of Tabitha. Both words mean “Gazelle.”

Tabitha lived in the seaside town of Lydda and was a member of the Christian community there. Tabitha became a local heroine. She was so deeply committed to the welfare of God’s sheep in that place that she devoted herself to making sure all of them had food, clothing, and a place to sleep. Apparently she formed a sewing guild in the church that provided quality clothes for the needy.

When she died, the congregation asked Peter to come help them. With tears of love, the first thing they showed him was some of the clothing that came from the hands of Tabitha. Tabitha knew the Good Shepherd, and she also knew the people in her town needed good shepherds and she became one.

Do you know the Good Shepherd? God knows the quality of our lives depends on the quality of our relationships. The best relationship of them all, one that comes with well-being firmly attached is loving God, the Good Shepherd, who is known to us through his son, the Good Shepherd who knows your name.

He’s not like any other shepherd of the soul. “I give my life for the sheep,” he said. “That’s how invested I am in their well-being. I know them by name. I came to give life to the fullest. Come to me....”

“Peter, do you love me? Take care of my people.” Do you know the Good Shepherd?

Last week I told about my mother who met the Good Shepherd when she was 18 years old. That encounter and subsequent relationship healed some large wounds in her soul and made sense of her life.

Now I want to tell you about my Dad. His parents divorced when he was five years old. In rural America in the 1920s, that was no small thing. Dad never saw his mother or sister for another fifty years. He didn’t know where they were. Dad’s father, a single dad and itinerant farm worker, put him in the care of his parents, my father’s grandparents.

Both his grandparents were harsh people who were hard on him. Dad said when they went to town on Saturday, people would cross the street to avoid his grandfather. He was not a nice man. His grandmother was equally harsh. My great aunt Alto married dad’s uncle Claire, another son of his grandmother. They lived on the same farm as the grandparents. Alta told me that the old woman did everything in her power to make her life miserable – and succeeded.

Dad was left-handed and, as was the custom in those days, was forced in school to be right-handed. His teachers tied his left hand behind him to make this happen. It affected dad’s motor skills, and he developed a terrible stutter.

His dad remarried and Dad went to live with them. His stepmom was the woman I knew as grandmother. She was a wonderful, loving woman who accepted Dad as her own. But the damage was done. In high school Dad was terribly shy, backward and awkward.

Their little town, Harrah, Washington, had a little nondenominational church, Union Church. One of Dad’s classmates grew up in that church and made my dad his mission in life. He befriended him and invited him to church. Dad was 17 years old, and it was the first time he’d been in church in his life.

Not long after that, Dad met the Good Shepherd and his life took a dramatic turn. To the consternation of his agnostic father and the utter surprise of everyone who know him,

Dad declared he wanted to become a preacher and tell everyone about the Good Shepherd who'd accepted him unconditionally, loved him immeasurably, and was healing his wounded soul. Like Peter, Dad loved Jesus and wanted to feed his lambs.

It took time, but the Good Shepherd kept working. Dad became a noted pastor and leader in his denomination. He was an effective and powerful preacher. I never heard him stutter! At the anniversary of his 25th year as pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Dayton, Ohio, they held a celebration. One of the guests was that high school friend who introduced Dad to the Good Shepherd. He told me that if anyone had ever suggested that my terribly shy, former stutterer father would ever become a shepherd himself, he would have told them they were crazy.

We have a Good Shepherd.

Martin Copenhaver is a minister in the United Church of Christ, which is part of the larger Congregational tradition. Several of us know Martin. When Martin was a young minister in New Hampshire, he was part of a retreat for pastors in the United Church of Christ. The guest speaker talked to them about evangelism, spreading the good news of the Good Shepherd. Evangelism is something the United Church of Christ is not good at and often seems not interested in.

The speaker asked the pastors when was the last time they'd told anyone what Jesus means to them. The question sparked a lively exchange – which is a code word for furious debate! Many thought telling someone what Jesus meant to them sounded dangerously simplistic and smacked of fundamentalism, with its kind of piety they had hoped to escape by joining a liberal denomination like the United Church of Christ.

Martin said he was haunted by the question. He said he talked about Jesus a lot, but seldom expressed any devotion to him. It was as if Jesus was saying to him, “Martin, do you really love me?”

He spent the next year telling his congregation about loving Jesus and how he loved him. In his last sermon at the church, he concluded his sermon this way:

As I am about to leave, there is something I want to tell you. I want to tell you how much Jesus means to me. I want to share my belief that everything depends on him. I want to urge you to learn from him. I want to assure you that you can lean on him in times of trouble. I want to ask you to listen to his words of challenge. I want to tell you that I believe that you can entrust your life to him. I want to affirm that he is Lord of this church, and that in his name you are freed to love one another and empowered to share that love with a hurting world. I want to profess that, though once people could not look at the face of God and live, now we are invited to look at the face of God in him, in Jesus, and live as we have never lived before. He is Emmanuel, God with us all, whether we are together or apart. That's what it's all about. That's all I know. Amen.

I am the Good Shepherd, and I give my life for the sheep. Peter, do you love me? Do know the Good Shepherd?

Amen.