

Sermon: What's Love Got to Do with It?

Scriptures: John 10:11-18 and 1 John 3:16-24

Years ago, when I was in college, a close friend of mine went to England and, since I'd always dreamed of traveling there, she brought me back a few little gifts. One of them was a white chocolate bar and the other was a keychain. Now, you'd think, coming from England, it would be a keychain with Buckingham Palace or The Tower Bridge or Big Ben on it, right?

Unfortunately, not. It was a sheep keychain. Double-sided, a sad sheep on one side under a rain cloud and a happy sheep on the other in the sunshine. I was flabbergasted. Why a sheep? She informed me of England's abundance of sheep and how she saw them on postcards and in shops *and* that this one, for whatever reason, really seemed like "me." I wasn't sure exactly how to take that. Was I a sheep in her mind? Or did the rain and sunshine message indicate I was moody? She didn't elaborate and I wisely didn't ask her to.

Years later, when I traveled to England on a church history tour and met my partner, I noticed on the train ride to Devon that there were, in fact, pastures full of sheep EVERYWHERE. It seemed like every time I looked out the window, there were more sheep. Sheep on the left side, sheep on the right. Sheep gathered together in groups, grazing away. White sheep, black sheep, all different kinds of sheep, all over the place. I remember exclaiming out loud, "There really ARE sheep everywhere!" Donna asked me what I meant—she'd lived there her entire life and it had never occurred to her that they were overrun with sheep. Now she can't help but see them everywhere, too.

This week, as I meditated on Jesus as the "Good Shepherd," I was reminded of my trips to England and thought about sheep and their shepherds. In the culture in which we live, sheep have been given a bad name. Sheep are viewed as passive, as followers without a will of their own. When we think of someone who is blindly following an ideology we don't agree with, we call them... sheep. Thinking of sheep this way turns the shepherds into bad guys with ill intent, leading unwitting folks to their doom. But here's the thing. Sheep aren't mindless drones; they aren't lemmings. They would not follow anyone over a cliff, for instance. By the same token, shepherds aren't evil men trying to steer their flock to their doom: they are responsible for the

sheep. They lead them, yes, but they lead them to food, water, and safety. They care for them. And it would seem God has a heart for the shepherds. There is a long biblical history of significant shepherds. The father of Israel, Abraham, was a shepherd. So was his grandson, Jacob. Moses was a shepherd as was King David. And who were the first to hear the news of the birth of Jesus? SHEPHERDS! The humble shepherd is clearly close to the heart of God. As we think about our passage today, these are important points to keep in mind.

In the gospel called John, we hear Jesus speaking to the religious elite and calling himself the good shepherd. He adds the descriptor “good” because he must. Shepherds in this time weren’t exactly among the privileged few. They weren’t elite. They did rather menial work—a tough job, a dirty job, and a rather risky one. Jesus must add the qualifier “good,” I think, to make this analogy more palatable to the audience he was speaking to.

Jesus goes on to tell us what makes him the good shepherd. He puts the sheep before himself, sacrificing himself when necessary. He puts his care for the sheep above all else. And if that wasn’t enough for the religious elites to “get it,” Jesus expresses that his interest and care isn’t just for *some* sheep, it’s not just for the select few, but for *other* sheep who he will gather in order that *all may be one* flock under one shepherd. You may recall elsewhere in the gospels the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus says, in fact, that he would go to great lengths to save even one sheep missing from the fold. Nancy R. Blakey, in her commentary on this passage, writes, “Jesus seeks out the lost, those in need of being rescued, who are often the forgotten of our society.” For Jesus, perhaps no sheep is truly lost because he will go look for them, wherever they are.

My primary theological conviction is that God meets us where we are. Jesus met each of the disciples where they were after the resurrection, memorably letting Thomas touch his wounds to reassure Thomas in his doubts. When Jesus talks about being a good shepherd, he’s talking about meeting the sheep where they are, but he doesn’t stop there. Now let me pause for a moment, because I need to explain something: When I was in a chaplaincy internship, my supervisor would always ask us to change our phrasing when we used the word “but.” She would challenge us to use the phrase, “and, at the same time,” instead. So, I will say to you, Jesus is meeting them where they are, *and at the same time*, he is doing something more. He’s also saying that he leads

them. The good shepherd doesn't just come to be with us in our spaces and leave us there. Jesus meets us where we are *and at the same time* his teachings transform us. He shows us how we are to live in community with others. That way of life modeled by our Lord and Savior comes down to one primary call: love.

At its essence this is what it means to live a Christian life, a life in which we are led by the ministry, teachings, and mission of Jesus of Nazareth—led to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. To live a Christian life is to take that love, as taught and modeled by Jesus, out into the world that is desperately in need of it. Look around you. Open the paper. Turn on the news. Walk down the street and you can't help but take note of how painfully the world aches for the kind of love exemplified by Jesus. And my friends, it is our job to be the Body of Christ in the world, is it not?

You may have noticed that the title of today's sermon is: What's love got to do with it? This song by the great Tina Turner has been in my head all week as I ruminated over our passages (and rest assured, I'm not going to spontaneously burst into song from the pulpit. No needs that to haunt their nightmares). As I reflected further not just on The Good Shepherd, but also on the passage in the first letter of John, I couldn't help but think about this song. So often we get caught up in our own biases, we get fixated on who's doing right and who's doing wrong. We get wrapped up in the minutia of belief and forget that those things, while interesting and important in many ways, ultimately don't matter if we forget our first call: to love. If we call ourselves followers of the Way of Jesus Christ, then we know that all the right belief in the world doesn't matter if we don't first understand how to love. In 1 John, the writer is very explicit about what love has to do with it. For John, as for Jesus, love wasn't just something you feel. It's not just a word. It's a verb. Love is a verb. Love is something you do.

"Little children," John writes, "let us love, not in word or in speech, but in truth and action." He continues a few verses later with a charge, "that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as God has commanded us." Believe in Jesus Christ *and at the same time* love one another. That "love one another" command here specifically speaks to loving others in our flock, but as Jesus himself noted, he desires for all of us to be one flock with one

shepherd. As we seek to model ourselves after the way of Jesus, let us love one another and love others, especially those who aren't like us. Let us love our neighbors. Let us love our Black, brown, and white neighbors. Let us love our gay and straight neighbors. Our transgender and cisgender neighbors. Our old and young neighbors. Our disabled and able neighbors. Our immigrant and refugee neighbors as well as our fellow American citizen neighbors. Our poor and wealthy neighbors. Our neighbors from other social classes. Let us love our neighbors beyond the boundaries that keep us apart toward that vision of one flock under one shepherd.

What's love got to do with it? As it happens, love has everything to do with it. Tina Turner may have sung that love is a second-hand emotion, but Jesus clearly believes otherwise. For Jesus as for the disciples, as for us, love is *the* primary emotion. Love is the motivation behind everything. I have always said that I can work with just about anyone if their motivation is love.

Jesus approaches the sheep, us, from a place of love and assures us that he will never leave our hearts broken. When we get lost, when we feel like we are far from home with no hope of return, Jesus will find us. That's good news! Jesus will sit with us and walk beside us through all our trials and tribulations. *And at the same time*, as the Psalmist suggests, he will lead us down paths to rest, to renewal, and to acts of service inspired by great love.

And there's one more notable thing about sheep: we, like sheep, do best in community. When I saw those sheep on those hills in England, I couldn't help but notice how they were clustered together. They belonged to one another. And friends, we can look at the words of Jesus of Nazareth right here and be assured that we belong to him. *And at the same time...* just as we belong to him, we belong to one another. Let us love, not just in word and in speech, but also in deed and truth. Let us love beyond the borders of our own pastures. Let us love into a vision in which all children created in the image of God may truly and finally be one. Amen.

---