

“From a Sheep to a Shepherd”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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I John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

Our first lesson is from the I Letter of John. As I said last week, the author of John’s first letter was writing to a community of people who needed to be assured of their identity as children of God. But they were also in need of challenge. In this portion of the letter, John holds Jesus up as a model and encourages his community, in a manner of speaking, to put their money where their mouth is. He calls them to show that they love one another and especially those in need not just through what they say, but through what they do - how they live and give sacrificially. Now let me alert you to a potential stumbling block in the text. When you hear John saying, “We receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him,” keep in mind that during that time, people were far less likely to avoid persecution and hardship than we are. So what they ask for and receive must be something different than avoidance of tough times and a stockpile of material wealth. Perhaps what they ask for and receive is the Spirit, the assurance of God’s presence and the power to live in love. *Read I John 3 here.*

Our second lesson is from the Gospel of John. It is worth noting that the letters of John and the Gospel of John reflect a similar theology. Though most scholars tend to think they weren’t written by the same person, they do agree that they were more than likely written to and for the same community. As you hear this passage from John’s gospel, ponder how Jesus speaks of laying down his life for the sheep. When he affirms that he has other sheep, not of this fold, remember how the inclusion of Gentiles, non-Jews, was an important issue in the early church. And then think about what other sheep, not of this fold, may need to be included in the outreach of our community of faith and welcomed into our ranks. *Read John 10 here.*

I am a big fan of the television show *Jeopardy*. I don’t often get to watch it, but when I do, I really get into it. You can ask my daughters. I follow right along with Alex Trebek. I answer the questions right along with the contestants. Actually, if you are familiar with the show, then you know it is not so much about providing the answers to the questions as it is providing the questions to the answers. In fact, players have to phrase their answers in the form of a question, or their answer doesn’t count.

You know how it works. Pick a category. Let’s say, oh I don’t know, Jesus’ “*I Am*” statements in the Gospel of John. The answer might be, “Food which is sustenance for one’s spirit.” The question is “*What is ‘I am the Bread of Life?’*” Say the answer is, “Agricultural feature reminding us that being connected to God and one another is the only way to bring forth healthy spiritual fruit.” “*What is ‘I am the True Vine?’*” Say the answer is, “Source of illumination helping us to see rightly and overcoming the darkness of evil in ourselves and the world.” “*What is ‘I am The Light of the World?’*” Or take today’s text, “Caregiver whose voice calls us to love sacrificially.” “*What is ‘I am the Good Shepherd?’*”

It strikes me that this phrasing of the answer in the form of a question is not a bad approach to studying Biblical passages. To ask what sort of question or questions a passage might be intended to answer is to move us beyond trivia, facts for the sake of facts without any application, to life-transforming meaning and wisdom. In the case of today's texts, I think the answer phrased in the form of a question might be, "How does a soul grow? Or how does a persons' spiritual life mature?"

The first answer our texts provide to that question is this: be like a sheep. Now those of you who have spent any time on a farm, or who have read or know anything about sheep are probably just about to tune me out, if you haven't already. I can see the wheels turning now. Don't you know that sheep are among the dumbest creatures in the animal kingdom? That metaphor might have worked in your previous churches, Aaron, but not here. This is McLean. This is Northern Virginia. We went to Harvard and Yale and Princeton and Brown and Dartmouth and Penn and UVA (and I probably left yours out!). We have high powered jobs. We made it this far in life by using our brains and thinking critically. Don't you dare insult our intelligence by telling us that we are sheep!

Of course any metaphor has its limits. By saying that we are to be like sheep (a favorite biblical metaphor by the way), the text doesn't mean to say that we need to check our brains at the door, to fail to think critically, to have a herd mentality, or to be led along by any old voice. It is not the dumbness, but *the dependence* of sheep that Jesus seeks to emphasize by calling himself the Good Shepherd. It is the sheep's need for care and their ability to recognize their shepherd's voice that Jesus is speaking to here. To be like a sheep is to affirm that I can't go it alone. It is to learn to set aside my efforts to project my practiced air of invulnerability and to acknowledge that I need help.

Alcoholics begin their recovery when, in church basements or other meeting spaces, they take the first step to admit that they are powerless over alcohol and that their lives have become unmanageable. They grow in their recovery when they come to believe that a power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity. And the ones who make it in sobriety begin to listen carefully for what that power might be saying and how that power might be working in, through, and beyond people. In other words, they become teachable, willing to be shaped and molded by something larger than their own destructive self-will run rampant. They become like sheep.

Actually, whether we want to admit it or not, we all get shaped and molded by forces beyond ourselves from the beginning to the end of life.

In 1954, a family life educator by the name of Dorothy Law Nolte crafted a poem for her own advice column in the Torrance Herald, a now defunct Los Angeles area newspaper. Little did Nolte know then that, thanks to Dear Abby, her guidance on child-rearing would be taped to refrigerators and framed and hung in living rooms and hallways around the world.

Her poem, entitled "*Children Learn What They Live,*" went like this:

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.

If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.
If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.
If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.¹

Nolte's poem speaks to how values and behaviors get instilled in human beings. From our earliest years, we learn values and behaviors from observing and then living them. We learn behaviors from seeing them modeled for us in the actions of parents and other adults, we come to claim values as our own as we experience how they make a difference in our own and other's lives. We learn patience, determination, generosity, truthfulness, and the like at least in part from seeing those things demonstrated.

Just as we learn admirable values and behaviors through example and practice, we learn their opposites: impatience, self-centeredness, deceit, lack of resolve and lack of respect for self or others in the same way. The learning never stops. We pick up messages through what we watch on TV, what we hear on the radio, what we experience in our daily lives at work, at home, on the road, at school. Though as we grow into and through adulthood, our views, behaviors, and default responses become more and more set. We can still be shaped and changed by the examples we see and the experiences we undergo. We are lifelong learners, impacted by what we undergo and what is modeled for us. Part of the process of maturity is choosing what sorts of messages we will subject ourselves to on a regular basis and what sort of models we choose to follow.

There are a variety of ways to look at the meaning of Jesus life, death, and resurrection, but one of my favorites is to point to him as the best model for how to live a God-centered, God-infused life. In John's gospel, when Jesus says, "*I am the Good Shepherd and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep,*" he is providing the disciples a model for how to live faithfully. The 1st letter of John picks up on this when it says, "We know love by this, that he laid down our lives for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Let us love not in word and speech, but in truth and action." And both passages are informed by Jesus post-resurrection appearance to Peter in John 21, where he asks Peter three times, "*Do you love me?*" and each time, after Peter answers yes, Jesus tells him, "*Then take care of my sheep.*"

Which brings us to our text's second answer to the question, "How does a soul grow?" Our souls grow when we understand that we are not only called to be like sheep, we are called to be like shepherds. In other words, a faithful life is not just about receiving care, it is about providing care. It is not just about

getting things, it is about giving things. Not everybody is called to be a leader, not everybody is called to be a teacher, I understand that, but everybody is called to care. Everybody is called to practice compassion.

This is why mission to the wider community is so important here at Immanuel. It is why we take our confirmands down to the city, why we have a Dreamer program, why we have an Auction. It is why we hammer nails at Rebuilding Together, make sandwiches for the Bologna Bunch, knit prayer shawls for the sick and grieving, take senior highs on Habitat mission trips, and why we care what happens to people in Peru. Our souls grow through service, through learning to care sacrificially for someone besides ourselves.

The natural order of life provides us with all kinds of opportunities for this sort of soul growth, if we but choose to embrace them. We are born into families where, hopefully, we are nurtured by loving parents who model for us what it means to care. Whether we get that sort of foundation or not, we grow into adulthood and perhaps find spouses and then perhaps choose to try to become parents ourselves. God willing, children come along for us to care for and nurture. Whether or not we have biological offspring of our own, there are opportunities for each of us to care for the generations below us as well as people in our own age group and older. And when our parents reach a certain age, we are faced with caring for them. Sometimes, in families, we wind up tending the generation below us and the generation above us at the same time. That's called being part of a sandwich generation. Sometimes, if you are really unlucky, you have to care for the generation above, the generation below, and the generation with you at the same time. And that's hard.

Caring for family and friends is important. But our texts for today push us beyond the limits of family as we think about what it means to not just be a sheep but to be a shepherd.

When Jesus says, "*I have other sheep who are not of this fold*" and the author of first John says, "How does the love of God live in us if we see someone in need and don't help them," it is their way of expanding the boundaries of our care beyond just the people we already know. And that's the third answer to the question of how a soul grows. Souls grow when they move outside of their comfort zones, crossing boundaries in the effort to express the sort of love God has not just for us but for the world.

If you have paid attention to the bulletin, or listened to Mark Fowler's announcement last week, you may know that today is "Wills Emphasis Sunday". On the Presbyterian Planning Calendars that pastors throughout our denomination receive, the first Sunday in May is always set aside as Wills Emphasis Sunday. Our Planned Giving Committee wanted to observe this. They wanted to take advantage of this opportunity so they hosted a special seminar on end of life planning led by Marjorie Fox between services. I hope you took advantage of that.

The Planned Giving Committee asked me if I would preach on planned giving, estate planning, taking care to remember the church in our wills or bequests. I didn't do that. If I had, I might have talked about how giving to the church even after death models something important for the family you leave behind. If I had done that, I might have said that giving to people outside of our family, even after death, says something important about the love of God. If I had done that, I might have talked about models of

giving, and how Jesus provides a model for us. Instead I preached about being a sheep, and being a shepherd. And what that has to do with planned giving, I'll leave it up to you to figure out.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Though she wrote the poem in 1954, Nolte did not copyright it until 1972. For more on Nolte and the poem, see for instance, her online obituary in the San Francisco Chronicle: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/11/14/BAGDIFNT9T1.DTL&feed=rss.bayarea> or the complete version of the poem at http://www.empowermentresources.com/info2/childrenlearn-long_version.html