

John 10:11-19 “Dying for the Herd”

Even though we sort of cleared this up last week, I want to share just one other reason why I personally struggle with the label “Christian.” And yes, I heard my own sermon last week. We shouldn’t be ashamed to call ourselves “Christians” because we are People of the Resurrection and we affirm the risen Christ, thus we are Christians. I get that. But it’s really hard to stay on board that train when you hear Christians accusing other Christians of not really being Christians. Ever see that before? If so, you know what I’m talking about. Most of the time these accusations start flying around whenever a significant controversy flares up over some hot-button issue. Then all of a sudden, you’ve got people on two sides of the controversy who claim that they are the sole guardians of the *truth*. And the longer the controversy continues, the more each side polarizes thus hardening their positions. Finally, each side begins believing that the “truth” as they understand it is the critical test of true faith in Jesus Christ. “Why are you in the ministry, Jesse?” “Because I have a problem with the church.” See where this comes from? This is what you get when you put a guy in the pulpit who didn’t grow up in the church but came to faith later. But it’s good to walk through these issues together isn’t it? That’s what I love about the church.

I was thinking about this whole, “We’re the only true Christians” phenomenon when I looked through the scriptures that the lectionary offered this week. I was committed to using the Good Shepherd story from John’s gospel, but the reading from 1st John caught my attention too, so I chose 1st John 3 as our first reading rather than the Psalm. In verse 23 and 24, the

writer sums up what God asks of us: “And this is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.” Pretty straightforward, right? “Believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another.” There’s nothing here about having to read the Bible in a particular way or having a particular spiritual experience or holding particular views on politics or social issues. Just two things: Believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus the Christ and love one another.

But since we’re here already, let’s unpack these two things a little bit. The author of 1st John seems to be referring to what Jesus taught his disciples about the two most important things we can do. Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” But the writer of 1 John says, “believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ” instead of “love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.” So what’s more important here as far as our faith and practice goes? Is it love God or believe in God’s Son Jesus Christ? I’d like to suggest that there’s not much of a difference here. One of the most important questions we can ask whenever we say that we love someone is, “Do I love this person as this person *is*, or do I love some projection of who I *imagine* them to be or *want* them to be?”

We can apply this to our relationship with God too. When we say “I love God,” maybe the real question is whether I love God as God really is, or whether I love some other image of God which is quite different from who God actually is. So when 1 John’s author talks about believing in the name of Jesus I think

he's talking about who God really is. Is Jesus Christ the indicator or the spotlight to who God really is? Does the God you love with all your heart, mind, soul and strength look like Jesus?

Here's something to think about – It's probably not that hard to love God ... in theory. If God is just some distant abstract concept, we can claim to love God without any sort of consequence. But when God starts doing things, and acting in certain ways, we either love what God does, or we don't. And it's at this point that we find out whether we *really* love God or not. There were lots of people in Jesus's day who were sure that they loved God – heart, mind and soul. But when they saw what Jesus did and didn't love they said, "Oh no you don't!" So if Jesus is the one who shows us how God behaves and what God does, then our response to Jesus is where we find out what loving God is all about. Stands to reason, right?

Which brings us to what we heard Jesus saying about himself in the gospel reading. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And he goes on to compare how a hired hand cares for sheep versus how a tried and true shepherd cares for sheep. The hired hand doesn't really care about the sheep that much. When the wolf comes along to eat the sheep, he runs and leaves the sheep at the mercy of the wolf who has no mercy at all. The shepherd, on the other hand, cares for the flock in a way that the hired hand doesn't.

I think in the Good Shepherd story, Jesus was making reference to how the leaders of his day saw the world around them. When there is real danger to be faced, how often do we see our leaders

putting their own lives on the line? Not often, is it? We've got plenty of leaders who seem to be willing to sacrifice *other people's lives* to achieve their objectives and protect their interests and positions. They talk about "collateral damage" when they're referring to the human lives they're willing to put in harm's way to get their way. And before you bring it to my attention, I am fully aware that there are plenty of people willing to put their lives on the line to carry out a leader's objectives. We've got one serving in the Navy right now, and that's great. That's what he's trained to do, and I sleep a little better at night knowing he's there to "defend me from enemies foreign and domestic." But this isn't about him. This is about the leaders ... the would-be shepherds whose responsibility is to protect the flocks. And again, the question Jesus put on the table was, "Are these leaders like hired hands who will let the wolf eat the sheep, or is the leader the shepherd who would lay his own life down for the sheep?"

The other thing Jesus is doing in this passage is challenging our concept of what God is like. Because most of the time, we are prone to imagining that God is like those hired hand shepherds. We think of God as distant and uninvolved, not personally affected by the tragedies and conflicts that affect his sheep. In fact, sometimes, we think of God as one who would demand satisfaction in blood if his will is transgressed or his honor is offended. "Better find an unblemished lamb to sacrifice to me or you'll all pay the consequences!" But Jesus says, "No. God is not like that." God never demands or desires or condones the death of a single lamb, of his own flock or any other. God is the good shepherd, the true shepherd, who would lay down his own life before ever allowing the wolf to get to the sheep. This is the

God who would do whatever it takes to find and rescue even one lost sheep.

And true to his word, when the grinding wheels of human hostility and bitterness fire up again and demand the sacrifice of another victim, Jesus throws himself into the wheels so that his own death might fatally expose and jam up the machine. “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” And here we are back in 1st John. This is God’s commandment that we should believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ that we should see what Jesus does and know we are seeing God in action. Then we respond by loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

End of sermon? No. I don’t want to short change you. I want to take this as far as the writer of 1 John calls us to take it. This, he says, is not just about God and about those in positions of leadership. He writes, “We know love by this: that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” So this image of good shepherds who lay down their lives for the sheep is not just about the leaders of the world. It’s not even just about God. It’s about all of us. All of us have responsibility for others, to look out for their interests, to care for their needs and their safety. Uh-oh. Yeah. And if you remember the Bible study we had on the John tradition and the sermon series that went along with it, this is at the heart of the John tradition – “Love one another.”

One could make a valid argument that this says we in the church are to love one another instead of everyone. And some of us will

balk at that and say it sounds a little too insular and coy and that the real task Jesus call us to is to love everyone, even our enemies. And I'm not going to disagree with that either. There is no doubt that Jesus *does* extend the concept of loving our neighbor to include those outside the church and even our enemies. But you know what? There's a risk of falling into that same trap of loving an imagined distant someone, and failing to recognize the real someone in front of us.

The call to love one another begins with loving one another within the church because guess what? That's where it's harder! It's not really that hard for us to say we love some unknown group that we've never met before. Think about it - they never challenge us. They never disagree with us. They never misconstrue what we say or have unreasonable expectations of us. Now if we had to deal with them every day, they'd do all those things and more! But as long as they're out there somewhere, we can love them 'til the cows come home. Or the sheep in this case. But here in the church, it's a whole different ball game. Every one of us can think of some *other* one of us who makes loving one another *very* difficult. And guess what, every one of you just got thought of by someone else as the "difficult one." And so did I. And that's actually a big part of why we're even here. We are not a natural grouping, united by similar social backgrounds, life experiences and interests. We are a motley group who often fit awkwardly together and who have only one thing in common – that we are called together in Christ to follow him and thereby learn to love one another.

There have been and will be plenty of moments when we are tempted to say. "Well, you know, if we just threw that one over

the fence, maybe the wolf would be satisfied and leave the rest of us alone!” But we follow the good shepherd. Or as 1 John says, “For we know love by this; that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

Remember: As easily as you can think of someone that you might be willing to toss over the fence, there’s probably someone else who thought of you. So none of us are the “special exemption” as far as deserving the right to be loved, cherished and protected. We are all here on exactly the same basis: he loves us and laid down his life for us and called us to follow and do the same for one another. “This then is his commandment; that we should believe in the name of God’s Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.” Simple really. Just those two things. Simple on paper that is, but not so easy to put into practice. We would do well to remember the words of one of our founders, Alexander Campbell” “We are not the only Christians, we are Christians only.” Christ is risen.