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One Service Sermon, The Rev. Carla Robinson – April 25, 2021

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the most enduring images in the history of the church, and it shows up everywhere. It has inspired tons of devotional materials, meditations, books, sermons, artwork of every kind, stained glass windows, sculptures, statues, music, long versions, short versions, hymns, songs. We have hung the name on church buildings, on hospitals, even veterinary clinics. And every Easter, that image makes an appearance in this season of life.

And why not? It is a powerful image of relationship, the relationship between Christ and the people of God. And it is all about relationship. We often call it the Good Shepherd. I would rather call it the Good Shepherd of the flock, because a shepherd without a flock doesn't make much more sense than a flock without a shepherd. These are together. This is a relational image, and Jesus weaves it all throughout this gospel reading, starting much earlier in this chapter and coming to this culmination where he says one flock, one shepherd. "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says. He's called us into a relationship with him that is genuine and true.

My mom used to tell us, "You know, you can tell me anything, make me believe anything, but you can't do that with God." She said it not to make me afraid of God, but to open up an image that says, this is the closeness that exists with God. So when it comes to being with Jesus, we can pour out our hearts in all of the genuineness that is happening to us. That means we can pour it out when we're angry and frustrated, when we're afraid, when we're scared, when we're unsure, when we're so happy we could dance on the ceiling, and when we're so down that we can hardly fit under the doorway. We can pour it all out in the genuineness that is in that relationship.

The genuineness of that relationship is designed to inspire us to step into stronger relationships in our own lives. You'll notice that I don't say that we are going to have perfect relationships with one another, but this relationship inspires us in terms of steps forward. This whole COVID business has been so tough on relationships. We've been cut off. So many of us cut off suddenly from our familiar pattern, meeting around God's table, meeting in the company of God's people, being able to share our hugs and our hi's. But you know, what's developed a strange new practice. Maybe not so much a new practice, as an old practice that has been revived. It's a practice I've come to call compassionate wondering. As we have been away from each other, maybe we've had some more time than we usually do to sit and wonder, "How is So-And-So doing?" Leading us to

those phone calls and those Zoom chats and even good old-fashioned letters and cards to ask a simple question. "How are you doing?"

We're all looking forward to being able to come back together, but I want to urge us to continue this practice of compassionate wondering. To have what Johnny Cash called in one of his songs, the ends out for the ties that bind. Wondering how we're doing, even looking at the big events in our culture and in our country as opportunities for compassionate wondering. Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. A few weeks ago, the events that took place in Georgia were horrifying to us. To see our Asian sisters targeted and cut down, killed, landed hard on us as a culture, but it landed very hard on our Asian siblings. There was an opportunity for this kind of beautiful, compassionate wondering to ask, "Gee, you know, I know So-And-So in our congregation. I wonder how they're doing? How are you?" It's a small question. It may not be met with a brand new, sparkling relationship, but it's a little question that opens a bit of a door to a little further step in relationships.

"I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says, and he invites us into a relationship that is action-packed. Now, you're probably thinking what's action-packed about sheep? Isn't that pretty much a boring set of animals? They don't do very much. They sit around and go "bah" and we get wool and everybody's happy for that. Well, actually being a shepherd and being in a flock was action-packed. You weren't sitting still all day. Yeah, you might be in the pen, but there was the going and the coming. And the pasture would call for travel, sometimes miles for the shepherd to lead the flock into a new, fresh place. Traveling miles for just the right amount of water, knowing that the season is changing and the landscape is going to change with it. Leading sometimes through passes that are going to be dangerous. It's action-packed to be in a flock.

A shepherd could suddenly find himself nose to nose with danger and suddenly, it's a life and death situation. And a shepherd has to make a decision in a moment. What will I do? It's an action-packed life. Jesus says of himself, "I love my sheep, and I lay down my life for them." Part of what he is saying in that is his own heart leads him to act on behalf of the flock. He makes the point here in this gospel lesson that the laying down is voluntary. It's not being taken away from him. He's not being forced into this at gunpoint. It's coming from the amazing self-giving love that bubbles up inside of him that has been incarnated into the world to be seen in his very face and life. I lay down my life, he says. I take this work. I move. I make this step.

And we see throughout the scriptures, him doing just that. Philippians tells us that he laid aside his equality with God to take on the form of a slave, to live a life of self-giving love. We see him laying down his life as he gives it in life of service and healing. We see him laying down his life as he speaks the truth, knowing that the very halls of power are reverberating with his words and ready to rebel against them. We see him laying down his life even on the cross, where he gives up the last final breath.

But really, what good's a dead shepherd? Doesn't that just mean the end of the flock? Jesus says I have laid down my life, but I also have the power to take it up. And even as he does so in resurrection glory, he doesn't just hoard life to himself. He freely gives it - the life that he raised, that comes back from even the grip of the grave, is life that he flings far and wide. And in his ascension, his gifting of the church with the Holy Spirit, it's designed to continue that action-packed ministry that he, himself began.

"I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says. And he calls us into a relationship that's dynamic. Apparently, Jesus doesn't think much of the status quo. He doesn't seem to be in favor of business as usual. It doesn't seem to be his way of rolling. In fact, he says something in this lesson that I have always found striking and a little bit scary. He says to his flock, this group that has come to know him and that he has come to know. It's maybe gotten a little cozy because they've got the inside track on being with Jesus. He says, "I have other sheep that don't come from this vault. I must call them." Hear how strong the words are? "I must. I've got to do this. This is not just a nice idea. I've got to do it." These other sheep are necessary.

There's a little bit of an understanding of why that's embedded in this image. A flock in the ancient world, a shepherd would often bring in, intentionally, other sheep for very good reason. The other sheep would come, mix, mingle, breed, have offspring so that the flock might be strengthened. Immunity would develop. The flock would become less susceptible to disease. The scientific world would say, this is genetic diversity. It strengthens a species. And so when we pull back on this and say, okay, well, we want to apply this to the church. When we're talking about God's desire to bring diversity, this is not just some icing on our justice cake. This is critical to who we are. This is critical to our survival. I would go so far as to say that we will die as church if we do not realize the beauty of what God is doing in the bringing of other sheep. Other sheep? Could you be a little more specific Pastor about these other sheep?

We're talking about folks that don't look like you. Folks that don't look like me. Folks who don't have this language as their first language. People who come from far and wide. People who come from cultures just being born and cultures centuries, millennia old. The diversity that God is calling into being is not just because God's a nice liberal and wants to do this stuff. It's because Jesus understands that it is critical to our survival. The whole flock benefits. We all grow strong and deeper in our understanding and our ability to reflect the amazing love of the Good Shepherd.

But Pastor, how do we even begin to do that? Some of us are a little scared. Some of us are a little tentative. Some of us we want to, but we're not quite sure how. Okay, ready for the magic answer? Here it is. This is it. If you've been listening and kind of dozing, this is it. Wake up. Here comes the magic answer, the how it's going to happen. Why, it's some of the very things we've already talked about. Remember compassionate wondering? That idea, that wanting to say, "Hey, how are you

doing?" Remember that business of a church and a people designed to do action, to be action-packed? That's part of how this hangs together. No, I don't have a magic formula, but we do have the words of Jesus. We do have the history of the church in our failures and in our successes. We do have it here.

Can we do it? Wrong question. We are told that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is living inside of us. It's not even a question of can we. Maybe it's more a question of will we. And even that is a question. What in the world, how in the world could we even stop or want to stop when we're told that this is the way that we will know God? How will we know that God is in us? When John is asked the question, he says, "By loving one another, by the love that is there." All right, I think this hangs together. I think sometimes I get it. The relationship. It's Jesus, us, Christ, church, Good Shepherd, flock. There's relationships that are molding and melding and bending and alive. You can almost feel it. You can almost hold it. It almost has a heartbeat to it if you listen to it.

It's Jesus and us, the church, Christ, the shepherd, the sheep. It does have a rhythm to it, doesn't it? It's not only in your head. It's in your heart. It's almost a little bit in your body. The shepherd and the sheep. The church and Christ. You're saying, yeah I get it. I understand the words. And just when we think that we've got the words, Jesus changes it. The Father. Who? The Father. Huh? The Father. Yes.

The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep. The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep. The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep. The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep. Oh yeah. The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep. Good Shepherd. The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep knows you. The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep loves you. The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep lays down his life. Lives and dies. Dies and rise. The Father, the shepherd, and the sheep. Oh yeah. The Father, the shepherd, and the flock. That flock. The Father, the shepherd, and the flock. Other sheep. The Father, the shepherd, and the flock. New sheep, old sheep, young sheep, other sheep, all sheep. One flock.

Mic drop. I'm out. No, no. That's not how we do it. No, we end things here by reminding ourselves of the truth. We say the truth of God's love stands. The truth of what we see in Christ stands. The truth of the Spirit's presence stands. We say, yes, that's the truth. Amen. That's the truth. Amen.