

“Being Good Shepherds”

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

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Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.”

As we continue in the fifty days of the Easter season, today’s readings begin to shift our focus from the event of Jesus’ resurrection to what it means to live as a community of the resurrection. The goal of the Christian life is to pattern our lives in such a way that we are walking in the way of Jesus, and so just as we speak of dying with Christ to the way of sin, so too do we speak of rising with Christ in his new life. This new way of living to which we are called means living for others just as much, and sometimes more than, ourselves. We often talk about self-sacrifice as the way of Jesus, and I don’t want to lose that language, but I think it might be more helpful to reframe this way of being as mutual self-offering. We might even call this way of being that we define as mutual self-offering as the way of love. As we read the 1st letter of John, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” As Christians, we believe that, like Jesus, we gain life by losing it. Now, we are not all being called to crucifixion as a way of finding resurrection, but we do believe that living our lives for something greater--the good of others--is the way that we find real life. This is a life rooted in mutuality, a notion that should be familiar to those of you who have entered into marriage. In marriage, each partner brings themselves, lays down their life and enters into a new life together. In this new life, each person retains their individual identity, but also shares in a common identity.

What is the common identity that we as Christians to share? I would suggest that we are called to join Christ in the field as Good Shepherds. Jesus says in today’s gospel reading, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” He also says, “I lay down my life in order to take it up again.” Jesus The Good Shepherd is good because he lives not just for his own sake, but for

those he cares for. We often have a very sentimental view of this Good Shepherd imagery, with Jesus gently cradling a sweet baby lamb, and we imagine that we are the lamb, and that God in Christ is cradling us in the same way. There's nothing wrong with that image. It's beautiful, and we should hold on to it because we do gain new life by recognizing that we are beloved, that we are held in the arms of God and that we deserve to be held in the arms of those who care for us.

But I want to offer an additional way of looking at this Good Shepherd image. The Shepherd lives his life for the sheep because they live their lives for him. The Shepherd derives his livelihood from these sheep. He does not \*necessarily\* accompany them and save them from the wolves just because he has sentimental feelings for them. Now, no doubt, in the course of tending to them, he does become somewhat emotionally attached to them. But he first tends to them because without their wool and their meat and the earnings from these things, he cannot live. In the same way, we cannot live without one another. We are all sheep to one another's shepherd, and shepherd to one another's sheep. We look out for one another, not just because we like and love one another--though I hope we do--but because we depend on one another for our very survival. Love is not just about warm feelings. Sometimes we have to love people we don't even like very much.

For what is love? Our scriptures tell us something about this. From 1 John:

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Love means taking care of one another. Love means watching out for the needs of others, and then doing something to help with those needs. Love means helping people with their emotional needs, like the need for connection. Love also means tending to people's tangible needs. It means sharing the world's goods that have come our way, whether they were given to us or whether we earned them by our labor.

When we give of ourselves and our resources for the tangible needs of those around us, we share God's love. And through love, we are transformed into the

image of God we were created to be.

As Jean Vanier wrote, “To become a good shepherd is to come out of the shell of selfishness in order to be attentive to those for whom we are responsible so as to reveal to them their fundamental beauty and value and help them to grow and become fully alive.

And, I would add to Vanier’s comment, that when we are attentive to those for whom we are responsible, they help us to see our fundamental beauty and value and help us to grow and become more fully alive. It is about mutuality. As God’s children, we are called to serve and be served by one another.

I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus says. All of us here are also Good Shepherds, and we lay down our lives for one another, sheep from the common fold of humanity, all of God’s children. And we find new life in living this way, for we live for the sake of others, as we find our identity--our meaning, our purpose--in serving one another--in loving one another--shepherds to one another’s sheep, sheep to one another’s shepherds. In this Easter season, may we remember that to live life in light of the Resurrection is to join Christ in the field as good shepherds.

Amen.