

Sermon: "What Now?"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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WHAT NOW?

What now? That is the question asked by my sermon, and I suspect that was also the question on the minds of many young people last Saturday as I watched them graduate from Queen's University in Charlotte, NC. (As most of you know, I was a very interested spectator at that event because my own daughter Carrie was among those graduating!)

Graduation is an exciting time, but it can also be a frightening time as well. What now? Where do we go from here? Those questions are important not only to those graduating from school but to others who find their life in transition. There are times in all our lives that are pivotal moments ... moments like, when we decide to get married, when we decide to take that new job in an unfamiliar town, when we decide to retire, and so forth.

No matter how old or young we may be, the important moments of life keep coming those pivotal moments when we know that from this moment on everything will change. Now sometimes those important moments in our life can be exciting but they can also be a bit frightening as well.

And the fear comes primarily from uncertainty.
Okay, we've come this far. What now? Where do we go from here?

How should Christians answer that question? What guidance does the Bible give when it comes to the pivotal moments of life? How can we find purpose and direction when ... at least for a while we find ourselves cut loose from the familiar moorings of life?

THE SHEPHERD

The answer is deceptively simple. It is stated in a verse of Scripture that many of us learned as a child. "The Lord is my Shepherd." God leads us.

Of course, God cares for us and leads us throughout our lives, but we are sometimes especially aware of that guidance during those pivotal times of transition.

Today we celebrate this most comforting of promises. Today is traditionally known as "shepherd Sunday." And rightly so.
All of our Scripture lessons deal with the metaphor of God being like a shepherd. "The Lord is my Shepherd," the 23rd Psalm tells us. Jesus proclaims in the gospel of John, "I am the good shepherd."

The image of the shepherd is a familiar one in Scripture familiar and comforting. I never fail to read the 23rd Psalm at a funeral. That Psalm tells us that no matter where we go and no matter what we do God goes with us. Even the "valley of the shadow of death" is not a walk to be feared for those who have God as their shepherd.

In the middle of the night at the hospital we never tire of hearing Jesus say, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

THE CHALLENGE

But, though the image of the good shepherd is familiar and comforting, it is also challenging as well.

This morning I would like to try to help us hear the challenge as well as the comfort. I want us to try and understand that the image of Jesus as shepherd involves a call to service as well as a promise for personal comfort and help in times of need and uncertainty.

Quite often the work of the good shepherd is quite different from what we expect it to be. It is not so much about the "warm fuzzy" feeling you get when you visit the cute little sheep at the petting zoo with your children. It is about sacrifice. Listen once again to the familiar words of today's passage. Can you really hear how Jesus described the good shepherd in our lesson for today?

Jesus said, "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep."

Lays down his life? Isn't that taking shepherding a bit too far? I know that the good shepherd was supposed to love his animals. I love my animals. I'm a dog lover. I would do a lot for my dogs. But, lay down my life for them? Sorry Nick and Snowball. I'm not that great a dog lover!

But, this is how Jesus portrays the good shepherd. Indeed, those who do not have this commitment to the death are referred to as "hired hands" who run away at the first sign of trouble. They let the wolves into the flock and allow them to scatter them because they don't really care about the flock. All they are after is a paycheck.

Not so with the good shepherd. The good shepherd is not in it for the money. The good shepherd is in it for love. The good shepherd knows the flock by name. When the good shepherd calls, the sheep answer.

Obviously, this is no ordinary shepherd. This shepherd goes way beyond the call of duty. Indeed, as the next few verses make plain, this passage is not really about sheep and shepherds at all but about God's people and God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

THE CROSS WAS NO ACCIDENT

How does God in Christ save us and shepherd us through life?
By deliberately giving His life for us.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd I lay down my life for my sheep."
This is not something that occurs by way of an unavoidable tragic circumstance. It is something that Jesus deliberately takes upon himself as a way of fulfilling the will of God. (John 10:17-18) Jesus is speaking about his death on the cross.

The cross was no accident. The cross was the will of God. It was God's way of proclaiming love and forgiveness in the middle of a hostile world. The cross was a

way of saying that God in Christ has taken on the worst that the world has to offer and has come out the other side victorious.

What next?

Where do we go from here?

None of us can know for sure the answer to those questions.

But, one thing we can know for sure no matter where we go and no matter what happens, the God of the good shepherd goes with us. The God who loves us enough to even die for us goes with us.

There is no one that can condemn us and nothing that can harm us if we walk with the one who walked the way of the cross. The good shepherd has already laid down his life for us. What more do we need to know? As Paul put it, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven, freed and saved for all eternity.

It is not the warm, fuzzy picture of Jesus cuddling the lambs that saves us. That picture from our Sunday School days as cute as it was ... is misleading. In order to really understand the salvation of the good shepherd we have to do what my high school English teacher told me never to do. We have to mix our metaphors.

In the salvation offered by Jesus Christ, the shepherd becomes one of the flock. In particular, he becomes the sacrificial lamb who is slain for the sins of many.

It has become fashionable in some theological circles to portray Jesus as the victim of circumstance. These "historical" reconstructions assume that no one would willing to do what Jesus says over and over again in the gospel that he was willing to do. No one, they assume, would be willing to lay down their life in this way ... by dying on a cross.

And so, they portray Jesus not as the good shepherd, the Savior proclaimed in the Scriptures, but as a victim a victim of his own controversial teachings.

Poor Jesus. He ruffled the feathers of the political and religious leaders. His death was "inevitable" because he challenged the powers that be. According to this way of thinking, the death of Jesus was not an act of sacrificial love but the ultimate tragedy.

I bade to disagree.

Jesus did challenge the powers that be. Jesus did ruffle the feathers of the religious and political leaders. But, if we believe that the Scriptures are true in any meaningful sense of the word, we cannot say that it was a political miscalculation on his part.

Jesus did what he did deliberately.

Jesus chose to be the good shepherd who laid down his life for his flock.

A WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY

More than that, Jesus told his disciples that they were not the only ones for whom he died. Jesus said,

[16] I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. John 10:16 (NRSV)

As we discussed several weeks ago, the salvation of God in Jesus Christ is much greater than any of us can imagine. There are more "sheep" in God's kingdom than any of us think. The grace of God in Jesus Christ runs deeper and wider than any disciple can fathom.

Those first disciples had a very limited view of God's salvation. The first disciples of Jesus thought that God's salvation was limited to the Jews but not just any Jews ... in their minds the salvation of God was limited only to the righteous Jews who followed the law more or less perfectly.

But, with the sacrifice of the shepherd, their whole world was turned upside down. Now salvation extended beyond their flock to encompass "other sheep." The salvation of God in Jesus Christ was much greater than they (or we for that matter) could even imagine.

The death of Jesus was not just for one special group but for the world. The Scripture tells us that the people of the whole world are the sheep of his pasture. Jesus died for the whole world. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,

[6] For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [7] Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. [8] But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Romans 5:6-8 (NRSV)

For whom did Christ die?
For a world of lost sinners.
And that includes you and me.

Why is that so hard for some to believe?
Why are there some who so adamant in their claims that the cross was a tragic accident? Why do so many have a hard time believing that the death of Christ on the cross is the sacrifice of love and salvation?

CONFESSION IS DIFFICULT

Well, first of all, it is difficult for us to believe because we do not want to count ourselves among the company of the sinners who need such a sacrifice. We have a hard time admitting personal failure and sin.

As we discussed several weeks ago, many people can't conceive of themselves as sinners. Who needs salvation from sin when we don't believe that we are sinners? Who goes to the Doctor if they don't think they're ill?

No matter how many times we've heard the message, we prefer to see ourselves as strong and competent instead of weak and dependent. We don't need a sacrificial shepherd because we've made our own sacrifices. We've made our own way in the world. Our sins are not so bad at least that's what we tell ourselves. With just a little help from our friends we can make it on our own.

That's a myth. There are no self-made men or women.

None of us are self sufficient.

None of us are going to make it on our own.

We are, from the day we are born to the day we die, dependent upon others. In that regard, we really are a lot like sheep.

But, as dependent as we are on each other, we are even more dependent upon God in Christ. We need more than just a few good friends. We need a good shepherd who calls us by name, who dies for our sins and calls us to a greater future.

But, though God in Christ offers exactly what we need, often our pride keeps us from accepting the gift.

HARD TO TAKE UP A CROSS

In addition to this, there is something else that keeps us from accepting the gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus. With the gift of salvation comes responsibility, and we are afraid of that responsibility. We know all too well what it cost Jesus, and like those first disciples, we too are reluctant to follow a path that might lead to a cross.

But, walk in the way of Jesus we must. We who are forgiven and freed in Christ are called to spread that forgiveness and freedom to others. As Christ sacrificed himself on our behalf, so we are called to sacrifice our lives on behalf of others.

I think that many people in our society have a natural bias against the idea of self-sacrifice. In a society that values independence and self fulfillment, the idea of deliberately embracing self-sacrifice seems very odd. The goal of many in our society is just the opposite. Many want more than anything else to be "free" from sacrifice and service.

And that's why they have trouble accepting the willing sacrifice of Christ on the cross. It implies that those who would follow him must sacrifice as well.

They are right in their assumption.

Jesus told his disciples that they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. The apostle Paul wrote that we are "crucified with Christ." The old way of life, the old rules no longer apply when we decide to follow Jesus.

The sacrifice of the good shepherd, the sacrifice of Jesus is our model when we are trying to decide what to do next in life. His sacrifice serves as our call, our vocation in life.

Our epistle lesson from 1 John even says as much. We read in 1 John 3:16, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

In other words, we are to imitate the good shepherd. What next? The answer will vary from person to person, but for the Christian the answer will always involve personal commitment and sacrifice. For the Christian, the way of true life will never

involve retreating behind walls of comfort and self-satisfaction. It will involve reaching out to an ever widening circle of people in the name of our Savior.

EXPANDING THE CIRCLE OF LOVE

Last Saturday morning I sat on the front lawn of Queen's University along with many students and parents anxiously awaiting the conferring of degrees. As I said, most of them were asking the question, "What next?" But, on that day, I'm sure many were also thinking, "Enough of this. Give me my degree and let me out of this place!"

But, there was still one more hurdle to jump ... listening politely to the commencement address. The speaker that day was Mr. Paul R. Leonard, the Chairman of the International Board of Directors for Habitat for Humanity.

He began his address by saying all the usual things a little joke about the valedictorian in his graduating class at Davidson who gave the shortest commencement address on record ... something like, "A great man once said to love your neighbor as yourself. I can add nothing to what he said." And then he sat down.

"My address won't be that short" (An audible moan from the crowd at this point) "but, I will try to keep my remarks brief." Paul then began to speak about how all of us are dependent upon each other. As is often mentioned at graduation, he said that none of the graduates would not be where they were today if it were not for the support and encouragement of their parents and friends. (And I thought, "You tell'em Paul.")

But, then Paul suggested that for the graduates to really be successful, they would have to expand their concept of family and friends. He said that after the attacks of September 11, the people in our country have been afraid. We have been busy building walls to try and keep ourselves safe.

But, he said that perhaps the best way to keep ourselves safe is not by building walls to keep people out but by building bridges to let people in. The work of Habitat for Humanity International, of course was a primary example of what he was talking about. Building homes for the world's working poor not only enabled people to have a better life ... it also expanded the circle of friendship to people all over the world.

That applies to our personal lives as well. It is much less dangerous to expand the circle of those that we consider to be family and friends than it is to shut people out with walls of fear and suspicion.

Oh yes, there will be a price to be paid.

There will be times when others will take advantage of our love. But, it is so much better to be taken advantage of from time to time than to allow our lives to become a meaningless retreat into fear and hopeless self-absorption.

I wonder if the graduates were able to hear what Paul said last Saturday. Probably not too many. Quite frankly, I can't remember what the speakers said at my graduation. I can't even remember who the speakers were at my graduation!

But, long after the day we graduate we are able to remember the people who love us and are important to us.

Jesus, in his sacrifice on the cross tells us in effect,

“Expand that circle of family and friends with your love. Be willing to sacrifice your very life if need be to keep that circle of love growing because in the end it is only that love that really matters. It is only that love that makes life worth the living. It is only that love that is the seed of life eternal.”

Hear once again the words from John’s epistle,

[23] 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. 1 John 3:23 (NRSV)

What next?

Many things but always love.

Our task as Christians is to always be expanding our circle of love in the name of Jesus. This is the task that he has given all of us.

This is also our joy and our salvation.

Amen.