

# In Christ's Flock

*The third of a sermon series responding to the challenge of 1<sup>st</sup> John to be love for this all Christ loved so much.*

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“Jesus Christ told us to love each other, in line with the original command. As we keep his commands, we live deeply and surely in him, and he lives in us.”

1<sup>st</sup> John 3:24, *The Message*

This week the Psalm and Gospel reading are familiar and very loved across our Midwest farmlands. Together they have inspired many sanctuaries’ stained glass windows built a century or so ago. Often, we who now live here and now in suburban America tend to think of these Scriptures about shepherds and the windows they inspired as a pretty sentiment.

But on the first day Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd,” no one heard it as a pretty sentiment reminding them of past generations. The first day Jesus spoke those words the priests, the Pharisees, and all other Jews listening to him say that for the first time—heard it as one bold statement. Huge! Mind blowing!

All those folks knew the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “The Lord is my Shepherd . . .” They all knew the psalm’s writer, David, was so beloved for his deep faith by God that God made covenant with David. His descendant would be the Promised One (See 2 Samuel 7). Everyone who heard Jesus say “I am the Good Shepherd” knew David understood God’s care for us reflected in a shepherd’s care for his flock.

Therefore, when Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd,” he was openly acknowledging that he was David’s promised descendant. That is mind blowing!

This idea that Jesus is the Good Shepherd is the key belief that separates Christians from Jews—we believe Jesus is the Christ, the promised descendant of David as well as God in human flesh and blood.

So what? Knowing this, do we go about our lives as if this important detail was a nice sentiment of our parents and grandparents? When we know how radical Jesus was when he said he is [\[1\]](#) the Good Shepherd this erases nothing we may have learned in Sunday school about the Lord as our Shepherd. Knowing this erases nothing that may have drawn us as adults to choose to live our lives as Christians. Nothing. We are still blessed to be by God's own self through the life and the resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. We are blessed to live in the flock of the Good Shepherd.

John assumed that we knew we were blessed to be in Christ's flock when he wrote us his letter. We call it 1<sup>st</sup> John, one book of our New Testament. John believed his readers were aware they were members of Christ's flock and wrote to help us love as Christ's flock.

I am fascinated with sheep in the Bible. Did you know that there are over 500 Bible references to sheep? Among them there is the account of Abraham being willing to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice until the angel of God stopped his knife wielding hand and provided a lamb to take Isaac's place. (See Genesis 22) There is also practical advice on sheep breeding in Genesis, especially as we read how Jacob built up his own flock from his father-in-law's flock. (See Genesis 30). God called both Moses and David to leadership as they were tending sheep. (See Exodus 3 and 1 Samuel 16) Not only did Jesus call himself the Good Shepherd, but he also told a parable about how a good shepherd looks for lost sheep (See Luke 15).

I have never been a shepherd of sheep, but I am the pastor of this flock. The word "pastor" comes to us in English from the Latin word for "shepherd." To herd sheep is to lead them to good forage and to shelter. To herd sheep well means to be aware of them and their instincts, their culture, and their needs. To pastor a flock of Christians means to lead them as we follow Christ. To lead a church well means to be aware of every member as well as the church's instincts, culture, and needs.

One thing every flock of sheep has in common with every local church is that the mature care for the young. When infants and other young children are baptized in our church, we promise to ". . . surround them with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God and be found faithful in their service to others. We pray for them, that they may be true disciples who will walk in the way that leads to life." (Page 35 of *The United Methodist Hymnal*.) These are not just words we say, these words are our promise and lead us to action. We surround our young with practical manifestations of our love. Together as ewes and rams of this flock, I invite us to think about what practical ways we can *Be Love* to the those

we might call our lambs—our children and our youth. What practical ways can we show our love and care for our children and youth?

First, we must remember that all children have no long-term memories. What we do now will give them experiences with memories for life. That may seem obvious, but it is so often overlooked by adults expecting youth to know what they have not experienced.

Since the early 1990's The Mindset List has circulated among college faculty and staff every summer. The useful idea behind the Mindset List is the young cannot learn from an experience they have not had. The most recent posted Mindset List is for the Class of 2024.<sup>[2]</sup> They were born after 9/11. They have no memory of that day. Unlike those of us with memories of 9/11, the day John Kennedy was shot, or Pearl Harbor was attacked, these youth had no personally acquired experience of how to respond to a global crisis. What they did have was our example of living faith that we learned through facing those other hard times. Many important life lessons are only learned by experience. We who have experienced love in the church have a responsibility now to be love as a church that teaches our young by example.

To do this well as a church, each of us need to get to know our youth personally. If you have a youth team coming to work for their mission trip fund-raising, you could love them by making time to listen and learn about them while they are with you. A great opening question is to ask why they want to go on the mission trip so much that they are willing to do your chores. If all of us who "Hire-A-Youth" do this, imagine how much love they will experience as part of this flock!

Second, we must remember that our children and our youth are still growing their brains along with the rest of their bodies. Both neuropsychologists, and experienced parents will tell you that human brain growth and reasoning continues to mature until about age 26. The most rapid brain growth happens when humans are two years old, and the second most rapid brain growth for humans happens in puberty, usually about twelve years old. Experiencing adult care during those ten years is critical to form another generation of caring adults.

Between ages twelve and twenty-six are the years when maturing brains build on those ten years to literally wire our individual identity, both in our vocations and in our relationships. Our own experience with how we were treated then lies lie the heart of every local churches' call to provide Sunday schools and youth groups. We want to provide these meaningful

opportunities for a younger generation because our elder generations provided them for us when we were the youth.

Third, as Christ's flock, we include our children and youth in a variety of ways so they can experience love and grace. As a church, we welcome children in worship and in fellowship as a church for all generation. We also provide them with dedicated space and time to be with their peers. We want our young to know they are supported by both our prayers and our gifts. We make special times in worship where they lead worship as well as including them in our weekly worship services as liturgists and rising technical crew members.

Finally, we also show our love for our children and youth through sustained faithful giving to our general church budget. As a church we are blessed to employ Lynn Barbeau as our Director of Youth and Family Ministry. Her creativity and experience helps us who are now grandparents support youth through both cross-generational events such as today's Penguin Day celebration as well as the means to participate in youth fundraisers, such as the dinner out at Applebee's promoted in this week's bulletin. We support Lynn's leadership with our youth and families with our First Fruit Giving—those weekly, monthly, and annual contributions that sustain her salary as on part of our general church budget. Youth alone cannot financially support the blessing of a professional like Lynn without help from mature members of our flock. Because we value youth ministry, we embrace our First Fruit Giving is as a practical way of loving youth as hiring them to help with spring chores.

These are just a few practical thoughts on how we can make John's invitation to be love for each other real. We love our elders. We love our neighbors. We love our children and youth.

Real love is always more than a nice sentimental feeling. Real love is practical. Real love is in relationships. Real love embodies what John wrote to the church of all time, "Jesus Christ told us to love each other, in line with the original command. As we keep his commands, we live deeply and surely in him, and he lives in us." 1st John 3:24, *The Message*

Amen.