

John 10:11-18
May 2, 2021

The Good Shepherd

First Presbyterian Church
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Just as the second wave of COVID hit in the U.S. this winter and we had to pause in-person gatherings here at church, I was nearing the end of a book I'd been reading for several weeks. Titled "World Without End" by Ken Follett, the book is about a group of monks and nuns and all the power-struggles that swirl throughout the Catholic church of 12th century Europe. I had no idea when I began reading that the plot would include a plague sweeping across Europe, overwhelming the physician monks and the nuns who served as nurses.

As the plague overran the town of Kingsbridge, the head monk physician named Godwyn realized his life was in danger and he and all the monks ran away in the cover of darkness, leaving the nurse nuns and the townspeople to fend for themselves. The plague ends up killing Godwyn and many of the monks, even though they hid in a forest outpost. Godwyn's successor as head monk is a man named Philemon, and he is now in a power struggle with the head nurse named Mother Caris, who took charge of the hospital when the monks ran. Philemon comes back to town and wants to take over, pushing Caris out of his way.

Bishop Henry calls a meeting to mediate the dispute. "Caris knew it would be a waste of time," writes the author, "but she went anyway....," planning to renounce her vows and leave the worthless monks in charge of the hospital. "You will not!" shouts the bishop. "I will not release you from your holy vows. To which Caris responds in contempt, saying, "I expect God will...." That makes the bishop even angrier. "This notion that individuals can deal with God is wicked heresy," he shouts. "There has been too much of such loose talk since the plague." "Do you think," says Caris, "that might have happened because, when the people approached the church for help during the plague, they so often found that its priests and monks ... had fled like cowards?"

"I am the good shepherd," says Jesus. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd ... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away...." It's never easy being faithful to God, and faithful in service to God's people. Without the good shepherd to lead us, we cannot do it. And without us as the church that God brought together here at the corner of Pleasant and Lexington, God's people would suffer. This church, just like the hospital in Kingsbridge, is important to God, it's important to the community, and it's important to you, its members and friends. And to keep this church alive and well and bring it to the other side of the plague we're dealing with, Covid 19, we have to follow and rely upon our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Today's New Testament lesson provides us with key insights into what it is to follow and rely on Jesus as the good shepherd who guide us, protects us and empowers us as the church.

When sheep are left without their shepherd, they are vulnerable. Left on their own, sheep will head in the wrong direction, face hunger and thirst, fall under attack and suffer accidents and even death. This is because sheep are by nature followers, like us. We all follow someone or something in life, being led along for better or worse. The problem is that when we follow the wrong person or thing in this world, we are led astray, we wander around aimlessly, we do things that don't make sense, don't serve any good purpose.

Consider an actual flock of sheep, for example. If you were to hold up a stick in front of the lead sheep as the other sheep follow along behind him, the lead sheep will nimbly leap up and over the stick. So far, so good. The scary part comes when the next few sheep leap over the stick and then you take it away. Do you know what happens next? All the other sheep leap to avoid something that is not even there. That is the strength – and weakness – of sheep and their flock mentality. It has them leaping around for no good reason, and puts them at risk of jumping in the wrong direction, maybe even right into danger and even death.

We need to keep our eye on the good shepherd – keep our eye on Jesus – to be sure that we are headed in the right direction, that we have protection along the way, that we are doing the right things – ministry programs that build up the church, compassionate outreach that has others feel cared for, and the promotion of societal policies and practices that are in line with God's will, things that help others find their way, feel safe and protected, and come alongside us in ministry and worship.

Jesus shows us how to be sure we're following the good shepherd and not being led astray by some other influence. Referring to those who would lead you astray or abandon you to the wolves, Jesus says, "The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep."

Do you ever stop to think who really cares about you? Of all the people and institutions set up to care for our needs – families, the church, our schools and workplaces, government and health and social services – out of all these things who is it that really cares about you? Who do you take your lead from? And who do you follow?

Sadly, too often we follow those who are supposed to care about us only to find out they don't, they let us down. Family member abandon one another, the church drops the ball, our schools get bogged down by red tape, our workplaces become too focused on the bottom line, the government fails you, and the health and social services you need most are hard to access and costly to afford. And yet, I would argue that the church – out of all of these entities – the church will be there for you when no one else will. At least this church will be; at least this pastor will be, with God's help.

As one little girl said when reciting the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, that's all I want."

As long as Jesus is all you want, as long as the Lord is my shepherd, our shepherd, we shall not want,” to quote the Psalm (more accurately.)

For the church to meet the needs of our families, schools and workplaces, our government and health and social services, the church needs good people like you and me coming together in faith to discern God’s will and to do the work of the Lord. “I know my own,” says Jesus, “and my own know me....

For us to be known by God – and by the church – for us to know God and to know the church, for us to serve God and serve the church – we have to be active in the life of the church. It’s that simple.

There are countless ways that we can grow in our knowledge of God, get to know one another as friends and members of this church, countless ways to serve the church and our community in Christlike fashion.

And we do this all the time – whenever we open up the Bible or attend Sunday school or LOGOS, whenever we connect with one another in deep and meaningful ways, whenever we gather in ministry or reach out service. That is how we come to know and serve God and one another as the church.

As we get to the other side of the plague we’re battling – this terrible COVID 19 – it is all the more important that we return to and even enhance our involvement at church and that we encourage others to do likewise.

God has a calling for this church, and it takes each and every one of us to stay on track and to fulfill that calling. It takes all of us here, and it takes all those who could be here, if only we would reach out to them and guide them back into the flock, invite and encourage them to active participation in the church.

Will you do that today – call someone from church you haven’t seen this past year or so, or maybe even longer, and let them know they’re missed and that we long to see them again? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Let us pray:

O God, you are the light of the world, the desire of all nations and the shepherd of our souls: let your light shine in the darkness, your Spirit fill the land, and your wisdom guide our world.

By the lifting up of your Cross, O Lord, gather the peoples to your ministry. Let your sheep hear your voice and be brought home to your fold, so that there may be one flock, one shepherd, one holy kingdom of righteousness and peace.

Lord, we pray your peace and comfort upon those in need, especially those we've been keeping in our hearts and minds these recent weeks. Help us to trust in your word and Spirit to guide us and to bind us together, as together we join in prayer as you taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.