

Sermon for April 25, 2021

“A Difficult Example”

One of the most beloved images of Jesus and His relationship with his followers is the statement in John: “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep - - I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.”

In Ezekiel 34, God conveys His genuine care for the well-being of God’s sheep, in marked contrast to that of false shepherds. Psalm 23 also comes to mind here. It is a manifestation of the Lord as our Shepherd. In John 10, Jesus draws such imagery to Himself, describing Himself as the kind of Shepherd He can be, i.e., one who conveys pastoral care to the sheep. Two things stand out: one is His intimate knowledge of His sheep, whom He knows by name and who recognize His voice. He speaks not of head knowledge, but intimate relational knowledge between shepherd and sheep. The other is distinctive emphasis in His willingness, as the Good Shepherd, ever to lay down His life for His sheep. These are not words of self-sacrifice, but of self giving and radical commitment. “I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.” The Good Shepherd protects the sheep from danger, whatever the cost, reminding us of Psalm 23’s affirmation of the shepherds accompaniment in the midst of dark valleys and the presence of enemies. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for Your rod and Your staff - - they comfort me.....”. Together, Psalm 23 and John 10 convey God in Christ’s deep solidarity with the flock, whatever the circumstances. This powerful imagery of deep solidarity and intimate relationship in Jesus’ description of His own shepherding is explicitly contrasted in John 10 with the unreliable oversight of the “hired hand” who does not truly care for the sheep and runs away at the first sign of trouble.

In our Reformed tradition, John’s view of Jesus as the image of the Good Shepherd is captured in the relational notion of covenant - - a concept of profound solidarity.

Covenant is the divine pattern for relationships - - one that risks danger in solidarity with others. The Abrahamic covenant between God and Abraham's descendants entail a deeply relational pattern of life in which God willingly enters into the darkest valleys in order to liberate and redeem. This pattern of life stands in marked contrast to the dominant symbol of most modern relationships: the "contract."

A contract is based in negotiation and prescribes conditional relations with the other. "You do this, and I'll do that." In a contract, the meeting of stipulations is the sole basis for continuing the relationship. The contract is deeply transactional and without staying power. Transactional patterns of life find communal expression in a community of limited liability. Even the most deeply involved can withdraw from the local community and satisfy all needs elsewhere. This sobering concept of communities of limited liability is one churches need to think about - - perhaps especially those located in neighborhoods in which many of their members do not reside, where relationships with the community surrounding the congregation may be tenuous at best.

Covenantal patterns of life, like transactional ones, also find communal expression. Indeed, flock and shepherd is an ecclesial image in John, and the covenantal pattern of life of the good shepherd embodies is to be reflected in the church's life and mission as it gives expression to its love for Jesus by "tending" and "feeding" His sheep. The demands of biblical covenants are right relations with God and others, especially vulnerable others: the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captive and the prisoner. Right relation to others entails solidarity, accompanying them through dark valleys. Jesus' ministry is to be a model for our own, for the risen Lord asks us, "Do you love Me?" Then tend my sheep.

On the other side of Easter, the risen Lord also invites us to attend to wounds. The wounds of crucifixion are still on Him and He directs their attention to them. Attending such wounds, is a deeply relational, covenantal practice that creates spaces in which liberation and new life can emerge. As your wounds connect to my wounds - - and

your suffering to my suffering - - a communal, covenantal life can emerge in which we walk with one another through dark valleys and gather together at a table prepared for us even in the midst of all that threatens us. The Good Shepherd is leading the way.

Amen and Amen!