

Handle With Care

John 10:11-18

Fourth Sunday after Easter/ 21st April 2024

The fact that Jesus takes on the image of a shepherd for himself is remarkable, even though it might not appear so to us. While in his day, shepherds were despised, in the Hebrew scriptures, God is often described as a shepherd. “Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1). The psalmist cried, “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock...Stir up your might and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved” (Ps. 80:1, 2b-3).

It’s no less provocative and radical, therefore, when Jesus assumes for himself the role of shepherd. He is the lowly and *good* shepherd who even lays down his life for his sheep.

To know Jesus as shepherd is to know God as shepherd. The crucified shepherd is the good shepherd in whom we meet the crucified God. The resurrected shepherd is the good shepherd in whom we encounter God’s Life that death cannot hold. And what does this good shepherd do? He continues to lay down his life for his sheep, he continues to care for the flock, protects the flock and feeds the flock.

It was common for shepherds in the Middle East to give each of their sheep a name. We can hear echoes of this earlier in John 10. The good shepherd, Jesus said, “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (Jn. 10:3) of the pen. This verse attests to God’s high esteem accorded to human beings. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:14). This is, too, a remarkable claim; we mustn’t miss its significance. You see, *Jesus does not love in general. Jesus loves in particular.* Jesus’ love is not love in general but always in particular. “I know my own and my own know me.” Knowing for Jesus is not in the abstract; it’s neither intellectual nor theoretical. It’s intensely personal. It’s a personal knowledge. It’s a particular knowledge for Jesus because we have been and are being known by Jesus. “I know my own and my own know me.”

Jesus invites us to attend to his voice. It’s the voice of one who loves us and knows us. His voice is the voice of one calling us and sending us and telling us who we are, and judging us, and correcting us, and guiding us, and leading us into the world, into ourselves, into “abundant life” (Jn. 10:10), into to the life of God. Later in John’s Gospel, Pilate asked Jesus, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice” (Jn. 18:37).

And, so, Jesus invites us to stay within earshot of his voice. And this is easy to do because this shepherd is *good*, and his goodness has a way of pulling us in and drawing us close. There’s something wholesome and true about the voice, and we don’t really want to be far from it. In fact, the Greek doesn’t really say “good,” but *kalos*, which means “beautiful.” He’s the beautiful shepherd or “attractively good” shepherd, which is what beauty is: attractively good. And it’s what beauty *does*: it attracts. Beauty is a good that inspires and motivates us to move closer toward it. The beautiful is winsome and appealing, summoning us to draw near, to get

close. That's who Jesus is as the good or beautiful shepherd, whose goodness and beauty make it easy for us to stay close as he leads us into goodness and life—a beautiful life.

Go down into the catacombs outside Rome and visit the places where early Christians worshipped, broke bread together, and buried their dead, and you'll see that one of the most pervasive images adorning the frescoed walls and ceilings is Jesus as shepherd, carrying a sheep on his shoulders, wrapped around his neck. You won't find crosses in the oldest frescos. But you'll find images of Jesus presiding at the table and images of Jesus as shepherd because that's what spoke to people. It's this image of God that resonated with them and summoned them and fascinated them and spoke to the depth of their souls. A lowly shepherd, a good shepherd, a beautiful shepherd, who loves and protects and provides and cares for us and even lays down his life for his sheep. Then, and now, he leads us—and sometimes even pushes us—toward the way that leads to life. If we listen to his voice, stay close to him, and trust him, he will show us the way. To follow him is to follow after beauty. We are called to follow beauty, to discern where beauty and goodness lead us.

Beauty, like goodness, attracts us, calls to us, and pulls us in. Goodness, like beauty, exists; that is, it comes with God's good creation. Ann Belford Ulanov, former professor of religion and psychology at Union Seminary (NY), suggests that if we project out upon the world images of goodness and beauty, if we follow after the good and the beautiful, if that's what we hope for and bring to the world around us, then goodness and beauty will have a way of emerging in our lives.¹ If our image of God includes goodness and beauty, our lives will reflect this image of the God we worship, and we will discover the goodness and beauty of our lives.

“I am the good, the beautiful shepherd,” Jesus said. With the heart of a shepherd, Jesus loves, provides, and cares for us. And as his people, he invites us to share in God's loving, providing, and caring, inviting us to share in the “shepherding” of God's people. The shepherd cares, and the shepherd calls us to care. In the Risen Lord, our beautiful shepherd, we see how God handles us with care and then shows us how to become people who also strive to handle with similar care all that needs caring. This text is fitting on this Sunday, for we know that God invites us to care for creation. As we welcome new members into God's fold in this congregation, we are reminded of our responsibility to care for one another. And as we ordain and install Elders and Deacons, we are mindful of the special burden placed upon them, the burden and responsibility of caring for and supporting the work of God's people who gather here, who, together, lead us in this ministry to care about the things that God cares about in this world. Together, let us stay close to the voice of the Risen Lord who leads and calls us to hold God's beautiful people and this beautiful world close to our hearts, to care and care for one another.



The Good Shepherd (Kriophoros or Ram Bearer), Pius-Christian Museum, Vatican City, Rome.

¹ Ann Belford Ulanov from a talk given to the Jung Society of Washington at American University, Washington, DC, 3 June 2017.