

## **Easter 4B – 2018 (1 John)**

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

Shepherd of all,  
by laying down your life for your flock  
you reveal your love for all.  
Lead us from the place of death  
to the place of abundant life,  
that guided by your care for us,  
we may rightly offer our lives  
in love for you and our neighbors. Amen.<sup>i</sup>

We are entering the fourth week of the joyous Easter season, still celebrating that God loved us so much, that He gave his only Son to be crucified for us and then resurrected and restored to glory. The Fourth Sunday of Easter is always Good Shepherd Sunday, so I brought my sheep out to graze with us.

Christians are in a relationship with God of mutual love. We are both loved and called to love in response. God's expression of love found its fullest expression in Jesus' life, death and resurrection – but the love found there was just the beginning of our new life in Christ. We are connected to God and each other in a way that is very deep and beyond our full understanding. This is a dependent relationship. Last week, we talked about being children of God. Henri Nouwen gave a description that talks about our "divine childhood" in a way

that expresses more of the fullness of this relationship: “*we are born out of love and will die into love, that every part of our being is deeply rooted in love and that this love is our true Father and Mother.*”<sup>iii</sup>

This week, the Gospel can be read as calling Jesus’ followers “sheep”. Either way, children or sheep, we are not in charge, we are deeply dependent on God for what we need. We are created, sustained, nurtured and protected by God in a way that we cannot accomplish for ourselves. Everything we are, we have, will become or might be rests on the actions of God – past, present, and future.

In a very comforting way, as children or sheep, we are still under God’s protection. Many years ago, this week, I heard a story on NPR that seemed to me to epitomize the kind of care that God can and will provide to each of us. It’s a story about one of my all-time favorite basketball personalities, Maurice Cheeks. More than two decades ago, when I used to follow basketball closely, Mo Cheeks was always on my statistical league...both because he had very good statistics, but he was a man of great character within the NBA community. He was a four-time all-star point guard and a starter with the Philadelphia 76ers. Later in his career, Mo was the coach of the Portland Trailblazers. There is story about Mo Cheeks that always

makes me think of our relationship with God. You can Google this story and watch it unfold on YouTube if you want.

Portland was playing Dallas in game 4 of their playoff series. A thirteen-year-old girl, Natalie Gilbert, was singing the national anthem before 20,000 fans and on live national television. In the stuff of our worst nightmares, she panicked, forgot the words, and stopped midway through. Mo did not hesitate. He gracefully stepped out from the bench, draped his arm around the girl and sang loudly to get her started again and finished. That's been my experience with God. Just when I think I can't go on, that I will die of embarrassment, that I have become the world's biggest fool, I feel that arm around my shoulder and I am able to go on again. We are under God's care.

The Psalm and the Gospel gives us descriptions of God's protection akin to Mo Cheeks' grace with that young girl. The Psalmist talks of God leading us into green pastures, to still waters, along right pathways. God's goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives, in good moments and bad. Jesus talks about a good shepherd who stays with us in times of trouble; who calls out loudly, so we can overcome our fear and find our way home. This is a God whom the Psalms says knew us each before we were knit

together in our mother's womb, a God who cares to number the hairs on our head, a God who considers us a treasured possession. This is not a God that will abandon us when we most need the reassurance of a divine presence. In the Old Testament and New, throughout human history, God and humans have been wrapped in an unending cycle of care. We cannot go it alone. We are called to be the kind of people who step out to love with grace and courage of God and Maurice Cheeks. We are all children of God, called to ultimate unity within one family.

I want to get back more specifically to the Epistle Reading, the second reading from the First Letter of John. Today's text from the Third Chapter is in a section one of my commentaries calls: "The Marks of the Children of God".<sup>iii</sup> This letter, as I have said before, insists that Christians are not just about good and pure thinking and belief – they must act in a way that shows their commitment to Jesus' teachings. In particular, our love for one another must be embodied, fierce, and should follow the example of Jesus who, "*having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end.*" The first verse in your insert clearly says, "**We know love by this, that Jesus laid**

**down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”** This is a high standard.

This is where Jesus’ teaching and Jesus example gets tricky. Are we as Christians to hear Jesus say: **I am the Good Shepherd**, and follow him into the shepherd’s role? Or can we comfortably remain sheep, taken care of by the Shepherd, with no personal responsibility for ourselves and the other sheep? The teachings of the Bible, especially this text from First John, say that we are responsible to act. As Jesus loved and served us, we are to love and serve each other.

We are **to lay down our lives for one another**. The insert goes on to read, “...**let us love, not in words or speech, but in truth and action.**” The Message version of the Bible expresses the next verse this way: **If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.**

That’s a startling image for us. **You made God’s love disappear!** We do that when we turn a cold shoulder to someone’s physical need, but also when they need a word of encouragement or

comfort or attention. We are under obligation to the people around us, we cannot just walk away. We often misinterpret our freedom in Christ to mean we can do what we wish. Instead, as Methodist Pastor Shari Gates puts it: *...we have a choice, to either love as God requires us to or not to. That is what free-will entails. To do the hard work that is contrary to the world. And to daily seek a higher level of love that can only be applicable within our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.*<sup>iv</sup>

First John moves into a reassurance that this will be good for us, too. We feel guilty when we sin, we feel guilty when we fail to help our neighbor, we feel guilty when we always insist on our way, not someone else's way. First John insists that if we do God's will and act with love toward others, we will be relieved of guilt and feel self-confidence and peace about our standing before God. It's easier to understand in the modern translation: **This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it.** Jesus has taken away our sin, but we often hold onto it, letting it rob us of joy. Loving and acting in loving ways to others, is a sure sign that

God is living in us and has taken away the sins of this world. We can live in freedom and joy.

What I am trying to say to you, baptized Christians, is that you already have been forgiven your sins and you have the Holy Spirit dwelling within you to guide and strengthen you to act in a pure and holy and loving way. That is what Christian does! You can be assured of eternal and abundant life, because you can live and feel it now.

Pastor Gates goes on this way: *God's love is active. It reaches far beyond the depths of human emotions and demands a deeper effort of placing one's self aside for a greater message. Yet we are incapable of reaching this level of compassion without the Holy Spirit's activity within our lives. Our corruptible nature disables us from being able to reach such levels of care, yet through the Spirit's guidance, we are enabled to exemplify by word, action and deed incredible doses of love--a love that defines us as relational with God and not pulled by the tenants of our surroundings.*<sup>v</sup> The modern translation of First John puts it this way: **friends, once that's taken care of and we're no longer accusing or condemning ourselves, we're bold and free before**

**God! We're able to stretch our hands out and receive what we asked for because we're doing what he said, doing what pleases him.**

This is the life we are called to as Easter people, forgiven and free. We are called to choose the good, to do the good, even when the price is high. We are called to live a Jesus lived. In return, we will receive abundant and eternal life; life filled with love and peace and joy. This is the Good News of Eastertide! Jesus saves us from sin and death, and even saves us from ourselves. AMEN and Alleluia!!

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<sup>i</sup> <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=89>

<sup>ii</sup> Henri Nouwen *Our Greatest Gift*, p. 17.

<sup>iii</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, p. 81.

<sup>iv</sup> [http://day1.org/3724-whats\\_love\\_got\\_to\\_do\\_with\\_it](http://day1.org/3724-whats_love_got_to_do_with_it)

<sup>v</sup> [http://day1.org/3724-whats\\_love\\_got\\_to\\_do\\_with\\_it](http://day1.org/3724-whats_love_got_to_do_with_it)