

THE GOOD SHEPHERD LOVES

John 10:11-18

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series B)

April 22, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 10, verses 11 through 18. It is on page 759 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, the Good Shepherd teaches us what love is. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 10, beginning at verse 11, we read in Jesus' name.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In Jesus Christ we see the definition of love. We have other pictures of love in our world. It's not like Jesus is the only image of it. But he is the strongest image of it, and he is the only perfect image of it. I suppose if God simply wanted us to know theoretically what love is, he could have just dropped down the definition in words. But he wants us to see it. And he wants us to know it intimately, instead of just theoretically. And he wants us to receive it. So he instead of just dropping it down in words, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:143). In Jesus Christ we see the definition of love, and we receive love.

So what is love? This is, without a doubt, one of the most important Bible words to define, because both the Law and the Gospel can be easily summarized in this word "love." If our brain cells rightly comprehend the meaning of this word, then our understanding of both Law and Gospel will be strong. But if our definition of this word is skewed, then both the Law and the Gospel will be completely misunderstood. And since the Law and the Gospel are the two primary doctrines of Scripture, a misunderstanding of the word "love" could completely overthrow the teaching of the Bible. So what is love?

The word is used in many different ways. It always grabs my attention when I hear someone on TV use the word "love," because I'm fascinated by the way Hollywood catechizes our culture

through fictional stories. And I especially listen to see if their use of the word “love” is at all consistent with the Bible’s use. It’s usually not, by the way. Even in the most wholesome shows, the definition is usually all about feelings. The other day we were watching *The Andy Griffith Show*. And Andy was explaining the concept of love to Opie, because they thought Aunt Bee was falling in love with some guy. She wasn’t, by the way. But Andy told Opie that there’s this special kind of love, “That comes from way down deep inside your heart. That’s the marryin’ kind of love.” (Season 2, Episode 26)

Now Andy wasn’t completely wrong. We do have special feelings for certain people, and when we have those feelings for the people we are supposed to have those feelings for, the special feelings are a good thing. But the word “love” isn’t really the best word for those feelings. “Infatuation” and “affection” are better words. So when you’ve got some warm feelings for your wife, you can say, “I am infatuated with you.” And when you’ve got some warm feelings for your kids, you can say, “I have great affection for you.” But “love,” at least according to the Bible definition, is something else.

Now, I’m not advocating a campaign against the culture to make them quit using our word so carelessly. I don’t think it would work. And a Christian crusade against *The Andy Griffith Show* might look kind of funny.

And I doubt it would work to come up with a new word either. Having a different word would make it easier to specify what we’re talking about, but changing language is nearly impossible, and we just don’t have that much influence. So we’re kind of stuck with this word “love.” And the best thing we can do is understand that it has different meanings, and some of those meanings are actually quite contrary to each other.

In the epistle lesson from 1 John, the Apostle John gives us the strongest definition of “love.” And you’ll notice the similar language to the gospel lesson too. He says, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16). So the Bible’s kind of love is not a feeling. It’s action—self-sacrificial action. So when you say to your spouse or your kids, “I love you,” if you’re using the Bible’s definition of the word, what you’re really saying is, “I promise to sacrifice myself for you, up to and including, if necessary, laying down my very own life for you.” That is love.

And I hope you can see how different that is from the world’s definition of love, because the world’s definition of love is all about our feelings. And sometimes—not always, but sometimes—the world twists the definition of “love” so far as to use it to justify doing harmful things to other people in order to satisfy our own feelings of infatuation or affection. This, ironically, is the exact opposite of the Bible’s definition, which demands self-denial and self-sacrifice for the good of our neighbor.

Now, when infatuation and affection exist within the right relationships, these feelings are good, because they make it a little bit easier for us to love. They make it easier to deny your own needs and sacrifice yourself for the wife you are infatuated with or the children you have affection for. But the action of love does not depend on our feelings. In fact, the highest form of love is self-sacrifice when you don’t feel like it or when the recipient doesn’t really deserve it. So love does not depend on our feelings or the worthiness of the other person. It depends on the command of God and the vocations he has called us to. God has called each of us to certain vocations. Some of us are husbands or wives. Some of us are parents or children or brothers or sisters. Some of us are employers or employees. All of us are neighbors to someone. And within

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these vocations God has placed certain people in our lives and commanded us to love them. These vocations define which specific people we are to focus on first, because, unless your name is Jesus of Nazareth, you really can't sacrifice yourself for every person in the world. So beginning with your own family, you can make a list of who you sacrifice yourself for first, and who is second, and third, and so on.

So in this way, the word "love" summarizes the doctrine of the Law.

And the word "love" can also be used to summarize the doctrine of the Gospel. But the direction is changed. The doctrine of the Gospel has nothing to do with our love for our neighbors. It doesn't even have anything to do with our love for God; that also falls into the doctrine of the Law. The doctrine of the Gospel has to do purely with God's love for us. And by "love" we mean the self-sacrifice of God for our good.

And to teach this doctrine, Jesus uses the absurd imagery of a shepherd laying down his life for his sheep. And this is how we know love.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (10:11) And if we stop and think critically about this for a few seconds, we might say, "Jesus, you don't really know that much about shepherding, do you? Because shepherds aren't the ones who are supposed to die."

And this is pretty much a universal rule in every line of work. Sometimes it's so obvious that it's not even stated. When it is stated, the slogan is usually "safety first." A more blunt way to state it is this: "The first rule of *fill in the blank* is, 'Don't die.'" Even in the vocations of a soldier or a police officer, where sometimes you intentionally put yourself in harm's way, death is to be avoided whenever possible.

Now sometimes shepherding can be dangerous, especially in the ancient world where you didn't really have many fences, and you didn't have modern weapons to fend off the wolves. There were certain risks you assumed by living in the wilderness with a bunch of sheep. A hired hand might assume fewer of these risks. If a wolf came he might say, "It's not worth risking my life for someone else's sheep," and he would run away (10:12-13). But if you were the owner of the sheep, you might assume a little bit more risk. King David, for example, before he was king, fought off lions and bears to protect his sheep (1 Sam. 17:34-36). He assumed the risk because it was his father's property, and he was also confident he could win. But there's a big difference between assuming a risk—knowing there is a chance you could be injured or killed—there is a big difference between that and willingly laying down your life for some sheep. There is a big difference between assuming a risk and knowing for certain that you will die. The first is selfish; you want to protect your property. The second is sacrificial; you value these sheep above your own life.

Now any shepherd or rancher who actually valued his livestock over his own life—we would get that person some help. It's just not right. Human life is inherently more valuable than animal life. This is based in the creation account from Genesis one and two (Gen. 1:26, 31; 2:20). And divine life—that is, the life of God—divine life is far more valuable than human life. If it's out of place for humans to die in behalf of sheep, then it's also out of place for God to die for humans. But remember, this is the Bible's radical picture love.

So the major problem with a shepherd dying for his sheep is the difference in value. But there's a secondary practical problem too. If the shepherd is dead, then the sheep have no one

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to protect them from the wolf. And we have the same problem with God dying for humans. If God is dead, then we have no one to protect us from the devil. The devil would love nothing more than to murder the shepherd of our souls, because then he would have free reign to steal and kill us at will.

But Jesus has a solution for this. He says,

I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. (10:17-18)

Now if a merely human shepherd said something like this—if he said, “It’s okay if I die for the sheep; I’ll just come back to life again”—we would think he’s been playing too many video games. We would tell him that reality doesn’t work like that. And when Jesus said stuff like this, his disciples did that very thing. They tried to talk some sense into him (e.g., Mark 9:32). But, unlike the mentally ill shepherd, Jesus actually knew what he was talking about, and he didn’t let anyone stop him from laying down his life, because he knew he had authority to take it up again.

Now there’s a little theological error that might tempt us here. If we understand this wrongly—and we want to avoid that whenever possible—if we understand this wrongly, we might think that Jesus’ sacrifice wasn’t that big of a deal because he wasn’t actually dead that long. This theological error underestimates the scope of death. Death is not merely that terminal moment when the soul departs from the body. There’s much more to it. Death includes the entire process leading up to it. And death is separation from God. Death includes the anguish the soul experiences on account of sin. The “breathing his last” (Luke 23:46) wasn’t anywhere near the worst part of Jesus’ experience. It was the bearing of our sin and the condemnation he received from his eternal Father on account of that sin.

We’ve all experienced those moments when the weight of our sin suddenly hits us, and we’re completely ruined. Sometimes we can be so heartbroken over our sin that we say, “I don’t even want to be forgiven.” Now imagine if our consciences weren’t as seared as they really are. And imagine if it wasn’t just one sin, but all your sins that suddenly struck your conscience. And imagine if it wasn’t just your sins, but the sin of the entire world. I told you to imagine that, but I know you can’t. We never come close to experiencing the full weight of our sin. We cannot imagine the death Jesus experienced. His anguish was exponentially greater than anything we have ever experienced.

In the relatively short amount of time Jesus was on the cross—and I suspect maybe just within those three hours when darkness covered the land (Mark 15:33)—in that short amount of time, the full cup of God’s wrath over sin was poured out upon Jesus. We should not underestimate Jesus’ sacrifice on account of the short time he was actually dead. Make no mistake about it: he experienced every drop of death that justice demands. And this is love.

This, as St. John says, is how “we know love, that he laid down his life for us.” That perfect life he had—that perfect communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit—that is what he laid down for us. And “by this we know love.”

The Good Shepherd has done this for his sheep. God has done this for rebellious humans. This is how he loves and shepherds his sheep. By this great act of love—laying down his life and

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taking it up again—he protects us eternally from the mouth of the wolf. And now he lives forever to lead and guide his sheep. He even lives to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. That same shadow that could not hold our Good Shepherd cannot hold the sheep either, because the Good Shepherd has been there. He has gone into the valley of the shadow of death, and he has emerged victorious on the other side. So now he promises to lead his dear sheep through it as well. The valley could not hold Jesus, and it cannot hold you, his dear sheep. The valley is not deep enough. The shadow is not dark enough. The Good Shepherd has gone through it, and he will guide you through it as well.

- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.

Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.