

“Loving Like a Shepherd”

Psalms 23; John 10:10b-18; 1 John 3:16-24 & 4:16

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Pastor James York

The story is told of a pastor who asked the kindergarten class, "If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale, and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into heaven?" "NO!" the children all answered. "If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into heaven?" Once more they all answered, "NO!" "Well, then, if I was kind to animals, cared for the earth, gave candy to all the children and loved my wife, would that get me into heaven?" Again, they all said "NO!" The pastor was now beaming thinking his sermons and the preschool teachers must have taught these children great theology; that we are all loved and belong to God, that we get into heaven not by works rather by the grace of God. So the pastor continued. "Then how can I get into heaven?" A five-year-old boy shouted out, "YOU GOTTA BE DEAD!"

Jesus is our good shepherd providing all we need, guiding us through death to heaven by God's grace. The 23rd psalm proclaims! **Psalm 23 “The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. God lets me rest in green meadows; God leads me beside peaceful streams. God renews my strength. God guides me along right paths, bringing honor to God's name. Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.”**

God's unswerving love provides us protection, physical and spiritual sustenance and everything we truly need. We belong to God. God will always embrace us with God's everlasting arms.

Jesus said, **John 10:10b-18 "My purpose is to give life in all its fullness "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away-- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So**

there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

There is much debate about Jesus comments that there are other sheep that Jesus will bring together with us. Billy Graham said: "The body of Christ comes from all Christian groups around the world, or outside the Christian groups. I think everybody who loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they are conscious of it or not, they are members of the body of Christ.... That's what God is doing today: God is calling people out of the world for God's name, whether they come from the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Christian world or the non-believing world, they are members of the body of Christ because they have been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their heart that they need something that they don't have and they turn to the only light that they have, and I think that they are saved and that they are going to be with us in heaven." Theologically this view is called "Inclusivism" meaning people who have never heard the gospel may obtain salvation if they respond to the light and love they have.

The Presbyterian Study Catechism explains. "Will all human beings be saved? No one will be lost who can be saved. The limits to salvation, whatever they may be, are known only to God. Three truths above all are certain. God is a holy God who is not to be trifled with. No one will be saved except by grace alone. And no judge could possibly be more gracious than our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions? I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith by word and by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me.

"How will God deal with the followers of other religions? God offers salvation to all human beings through Jesus Christ. How God will deal with those who do not know or follow Christ, but who follow another tradition, we cannot finally say. We can say, however, that God is gracious and merciful, and that God will not deal with people in any other way than we see in Jesus Christ, who came as the Savior of the world."

Because of God's grace, Inclusivist Christians believe all will likely get to heaven. However it still matters a great deal whether you are a Christian, a follower of some other religion or do not believe in God. This is true because salvation is so much broader than just what happens to a person after death. Salvation affects the quality of life a person lives right here and now.

Jesus said, **John 10:10b-11 "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly. My purpose is to give life in all its fullness. I came so you can have real**

and eternal life, more and better life than you ever dreamed of. I am the good shepherd.” Jesus then explained his care and love for us that enabled him to freely lay down his life so all of us can have eternal and abundant life.

The good shepherd metaphor defines abundant life in terms of belonging to Jesus’ flock, receiving God’s love and loving extravagantly. Our life becomes more abundant the more we cherish God’s love, and the more we love both God and people of all kind.

Peter and the disciples we are the hired hands. Confronted by hate, darkness, the wolf and those who are crucifying Jesus, our first instinct is to deny Jesus and run. However, over time, nurtured by God’s love, filled with the Holy Spirit, our life becomes more abundant and we are able to overcome hate, darkness and the wolves in our lives with love. Peter and the disciples went from denial to boldly proclaiming God’s love and loving all people.

Anthony de Mello wrote a parable about a church that became aware of the wolf within themselves and overcame the wolves by love and being: beware. “They began to beware of power so they were able to serve without controlling. They began to beware of religion which can lead to self-righteousness. They began to beware of saying a prayer without eagerness to couple their prayer with loving action with God. They began to beware of the Scriptures, so they were able to profit from the Scriptures without falling into bigotry. They began to beware of sacraments, so they were sanctified without becoming superstitious. They began to beware of their notions of God so they were able to recognize God outside the narrow confines of their church. They began to beware that their quest to be law-abiding, to be faithful disciples, can diminish their compassion, forgiveness and love.” Beware of your wolves, yet know that you can overcome them all with love. Living in love is abundant life. We are Easter people called to love as our Risen Good Shepherd loves us.

Jesus said, **John 10:11 “I am the Good Shepherd”** Jesus certainly is good in a moral, ethical, perfection and loving sense. Yet, Jesus used a Greek word that means good as in our model shepherd. We are to emulate Jesus. Jesus came to give us abundant life and the way we enjoy abundant life today is by emulating Jesus, our shepherd.

1 John elaborates. **1 John 3:16-24 “We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before God whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and God knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey God's commandments and do what pleases God. And this is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as Jesus has commanded us. All who obey God's**

commandments abide in God, and God abides in them. And by this we know that God abides in us, by the Spirit that God has given us. 1 John 4:16 “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.”

Henri Nouwen says that all of us are called to grow in love. All of us are called to grow up into the role of the gracious, forgiving, welcoming, celebrating, extravagant loving father. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus is guiding us into more abundant life as we experience God’s love, enjoy the care of our shepherd, celebrate that we belong to God and to each other, are empowered by God to overcome the wolves in our life with love and become so compassionate, gracious and loving that we draw all people into one flock of love.

Salvation and abundant life come to all who respond with love to the love they have received. Pastor Martha Robbins tells of standing beside a mother at the hospital bedside of her 19 year old son, Don, who was on a respirator having overdosed with heroin the night before. Her sobbing tears fell on her son’s face as she leaned over whispering words of love to her child as she caressed his face and body. Don, her son, died in her arms. Before the funeral they learned that Don was given the injected dose of heroin by his new girl-friend Janet, a nursing student, after he had taken his medication for his epilepsy earlier that evening. The two drugs taken together were lethal. Not surprisingly, Janet attended the funeral service. It was surprising, however, to see her among Don’s close friends and family gathered at Don’s parents’ home. Martha saw Don’s mother holding Janet’s hands as she looked into her eyes and said warmly, “Janet, you will always have a place in our home. You are welcome to stay with us whenever you are in this area.” Dumbfounded, Janet smiled a half smile as she hesitatingly said “thank you”. Stunned, Martha asked Don’s mother how she could love her, open her arms and home to this young woman given her role in Don’s death. She responded, “What must be that child’s pain, loneliness and isolation, how confused and lost she must be. How hard it must be for our kids to find their way in today’s world. I want her to know that she has a home, a place where she would always be welcomed, and a place where she could find forgiveness, acceptance, and love.”

1 John 3:16 “We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” 1 John 4:16 “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.” Amen