

St. John's UCC, Fredericksburg
April 29, 2012

**“The Shepherd’s Relationship With Their Sheep”
(Psalm 23; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18)**

One of the things reinforced for me after my brother’s funeral was the importance of community and relationships. The many firefighters and police officers who came through the line were there to support each other as they grieved their loss. Therefore, two weeks ago I attended the funerals of two fellow pastors in our Conference. The first was Rev. Fred Irwin, who was a member of my home church and preached here in the summer of 2005. The second was Rev. Brad Rentzel, who connected with me while his daughter was in seminary with me and we quickly formed a bond after we learned that we both went to LVC. While these two men had their own distinctive ministries, there was a common thread shared about them in their funeral services. The common thread was the importance of relationships in their ministries. There wasn’t a laundry list of these pastors’ statistics...how many funerals, weddings, baptisms, etc. that were performed by them. The main thing shared about these pastors was their faithfulness in ministry which was exhibited through their love of God’s people.

Today our gospel lesson takes away from the historical events following the resurrection to a Christological discourse, which is distinctive feature of John’s gospel. In this gospel’s account, Jesus provides some images to describe himself. He says that he is the bread of life, the light of the world, the live water, and the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The image of a shepherd has been closely associated with a pastor. It is an interesting image for those in pastoral ministry. It provides us with a different picture of a pastor. We often view pastors as leading from the front, but that is

not what a shepherd does. It is the responsibility of the shepherd to gather the sheep together and then stay behind them in order to keep them from wandering. Despite these contrasting images, the focal point of today's passages is about the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep.

The shepherd is in relationship with his flock. The shepherd knows their sheep and vice versa. The sheep are not just a number in the eyes of the shepherd. The sheep are intimately connected to the shepherd. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd, I know my own and my own know me." The sheep are so precious to the shepherd that they will lay down their life for them. We are not promised a life that is free from pain and suffering, but we do receive the assurance that we are in relationship with God. The familiar words of Psalm 23 are often read at funerals as a way to remind us that in the midst of our grief we know that God cares and will not leave us alone during our time of despair. God will lead us, feed us, comfort us

What does it mean for us to be Christ's own? Just as the sheep are recipients of the shepherd's love and care, we are recipients of the love and care of God. Our relationship with the shepherd is not based on anything we have done, but rather it is based on what the shepherd has done for us. In this Easter season, we give thanks to God for the hope that is given to us through the Risen Christ. The epistle writer reminds us that we know love because of because Jesus has loved us. We are then commanded to love one another, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. This is an invitation for us to be in relationship with the shepherd.

The ministry has really changed over the years. I have even seen some shifts in the 7 years that I've been an ordained minister, which make the shepherd image a little

difficult for me. There was a day when the people respected the authority of pastor. They heard the voice of the shepherd and listened to what the pastor said. Those days have been replaced with the mentality that the pastor is an employee and will be told what to do. It seems as if we have taken the spiritual elements out of the church and turned into a business. The flock doesn't stay together. We have more and more people wandering away from the church than ever before for a myriad of reasons. We have so many other activities that compete with worship and the rest of the church life. We have once again replaced the spiritual elements of the church by making it just another activity on the list of things that we hope to accomplish through the week. As the sheep wander off, the shepherd goes after them. Therefore, as we wander away, Christ comes after us to bring us back into the fold.

I have been researching congregations lately in regards to church vitality. There are several observations that I have made across the board. One of them is the fact that people are not committed to the life of the church as they once did. These congregations have lamented that they plan activities and programs, yet the people do not come. The sheep seem to have wandered away! Does this sound familiar?

If the Church is to have a future, then we must be committed. We must promise to be committed sheep that will be in relationship with the shepherd. The Great Shepherd has called us to be here....to be a part of this fold, the church! We need all the sheep to help us pass on the love of God made known to us in Jesus. This is what the reading from 1 John talks about. We know love because God loved us through Jesus and now we are commanded to love 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? 1 John reminds

us that we are love not in word or speech, but in truth and action. The problem is we have far too many churches that have lost sight of that call to love one another in truth and in action. If the church is going to make it in the future, then we must be committed in our relationship with the Good Shepherd and we must love one another!

The good news for us this day is that while we may wander away from the flock at times, Christ is constantly calling us to return to the flock and to offer ourselves in service. In a few minutes we will offer to God the joys and concerns of our congregation, we will offer God our prayers, and then we will offer to God our monetary gifts. All of this connects us to the call to love one another. Yet, it also reminds us that these are given to us from God. If our spiritual lives fully depended on our own commitment and seriousness to the faith then we would be in trouble. We can truly celebrate this day that the Shepherd is inviting us to be in relationship! We have learned how to love because of the Shepherd's love. Now let us be in relationship with our fellow sheep, so that they will experience the same relationship with the Good Shepherd. To put it simple, as fellow sheep, let us be committed to the work of the Risen Christ! Let's get to work!
Amen.