

IN WHAT WE DON'T SAY

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

May 3, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18; I John 3:16-24

The Shepherd themes of the three passages that were read today are familiar to just about everyone. The 23rd Psalm, is like a poem often read, a verse or two that takes you to a tender place in your heart. Maybe you think of a graveside service or a funeral where those familiar words of comfort were precisely what you needed to hear. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside the still waters, he restoreth my soul.* Nice. Comforting. Like the rain on the window through the night, you are reminded of protection and peace.

It's surprising really that this psalm appeals to us because most of us urban dwellers don't know much about shepherding. The majority of us, our kids included, have never been closer to sheep than at a petting zoo or perhaps during some summer trip on an Irish back road where a shepherd casually herds a dozen or so of the woolly creatures from one side of the way to the other, stopping traffic while the cars line up behind you.

Yet in spite of our unfamiliarity with the breed, something of the trust that is there between the sheep and the shepherd gets communicated.

Jesus tells us the sheep know the voice of the good shepherd, from the bad. The one whom they can trust and the one whom they cannot.

A minister friend of mine, Kim Clayton tells the story of pastoring a congregation in Asheville, North Carolina where one of her parishioners was indeed a sheep farmer, a *shepherd* if you will. And over the years as the sheep images kept coming year after year in the scripture readings in worship, her shepherd parishioner would critique her sermons on the accuracy of her knowledge and understanding of sheep husbandry. Corrections about the eating habits, cleanliness, intelligence, reputation, and care of sheep were his constant focus. I can only say that with a critic like that in the congregation, there are some distinct advantages to being a pastor in New York City!

But some things about sheep and shepherding don't require an "Ag" degree to understand. The last of the three shepherd passages, the epistle lesson, for instance, picks up on the theme of the shepherd's protection of the sheep. In order to understand it you have to know that when the psalmist of the 23rd Psalm, refers to the valley of the shadow of death, that's actually a reference to the fact that valleys were vulnerable places for sheep. Jackals and wolves could lie in wait and attack the sheep from a higher vantage point. It was dangerous in the dark vales. The shepherd would keep watch by day and by night, taking turns in vigilance, just as those watchful shepherds did according to the story that night so long ago in Bethlehem.

In the dark valleys, it was customary for the shepherd to fence in the sheep, gathering rocks and piling them up in a circle so that the sheep were hemmed in except for one opening, the sheep gate, where the shepherd himself would lie down, using his own body to close the circle and protect his sheep. The very *body* of the shepherd, then, served as the gate, his *voice* the warning and reassurance to the flock, his *vigilance* their protection.

So in the first letter of John, when the writer says that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has laid down his life for us, and we also ought to lay down our life for one another, he is referring not only to the crucifixion but also to that idea of the shepherd lying down at the sheep's gate, the one who protects the sheep with his own body.

Now laying down one's life for sisters and brothers in the faith is by definition a once in a lifetime heroism at best. Most of us are not asked to give our life for our faith. There is seldom a moment when the great cause, the single instance comes down the pike like that. I remember Columbine where the shooters asked some of their classmates if they were Christian and shot them if they said they were.

And I think of those photographs we have seen of the young firefighters who climbed the stairs of the World Trade Center when the buildings were on fire, climbing to a certain death that morning in September eight years ago as they passed frightened civilians descending those same stairs. But few of us is ever asked to do something as unrepeatable as to lay down our life for another.

My friend Fred Craddock, formerly of Emory University, tells a wonderful story of his own desire to be remembered for having given his life for some great cause of the faith; some momentous event in which his life was poured out in a dramatic and meaningful way.

And people would come and they'd bring tour busses and set up hot dog stands on warm summer afternoons, and there'd be film on sale and ice cream, and people would get off the busses and take their kids over to that spot where the great sacrifice had taken place, and they would say, "Now let's make sure everybody gets in the picture. Courtney, Travis come on over here because this is where Fred gave his life for our sake."

But instead, Craddock says, there's never been that great moment of sacrifice where everything was required, and he had to lay down his life. No great check he had to write in order to pay the debt for his being.

Instead, it has been a life of small checks, small acts, small things that he has been called upon to do, like most of us. A check for \$25.00 to the heart fund. Some pocket change to a fellow who looked down on his luck and was living on the street. Stopping to help a young mother with an oversized baby carriage make it down the subway steps. Tutoring a kid at his church who is slow at math. Getting groceries for an elderly neighbor who can't get out. Little stuff, the kind of stuff that never amounts to much... except, well, except that it counts. It adds up. It's what we do, what we do to express our

faith, because short of giving your life for another how else do you express it, except by laying down your life in that way?

Our Jewish brothers and sisters call it *Mitzvat Hatzedaka*, the doing of an act of human kindness in which something of God's blessing is communicated. And I would add, maybe something of God's presence is made known.

I've always been interested in the intensity of the evangelical wing of the Christian church to insist on getting the *words* right, as if salvation depended upon our getting the confession correctly stated and sincerely expressed. Crafting the words just so, accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, in precisely those words with an accompanying expression of repentance. As if this were a trick question and you had to get it right, with no help from God or anyone else.

Now I would not want to minimize the importance of making a profession of faith, Lord knows that we all search for words to express what we believe, and the saying of what we embrace as most dear can be a defining moment for the character of a person. But surely there is more to the Christian life than simply getting the confession of faith right. Doesn't how we live our life and spend our days count as a witness too?

I wonder sometimes if the most earnest expressions of faith are not so much what we say but what we don't say, rather what we *do* that counts.

Jesus posed this question once, when he asked his critics, "Which of these two sons pleased his father most: the one who said he *would not* go into the vineyard to work but *did*; or the one who said he *would* and *did not*. And when the scribes and Pharisees said, "The first son." Jesus said, "So I tell you tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

The late David H.C. Read former pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church here in New York was a prisoner of war during World War II. He writes of that experience and his observations of those with whom he was imprisoned. "It puzzled me," Dr. Read wrote,

that some of the most fervent believers behaved rather badly under the stress of hunger and anxiety, while those I would have considered somewhat lukewarm in... "Christian witness" were pillars of decency and goodwill. It began to dawn on me that those who were desperately concerned with the salvation of their own souls... were also likely to be equally concerned with meeting their own physical needs. It is because of this experience that I have reservations about all religion that tends toward the fanatical and the demonstrative.¹

There is a time and a place to witness to one's faith in words, and I would not diminish that. But more and more, I have come to value the simple acts of kindness that others offer quite modestly as an expression of the goodness that is within them, a God given goodness, that may be more pleasing to God than the most eloquent and carefully crafted professions of faith.

A few weeks ago when I was in the hospital I looked forward to the visits of a nursing aide with whom I felt simpatico. I'm not sure what it was that seemed to click for us, but it did. We couldn't really have had less in common. Her life was a soap opera. She was raising small kids, involved with a man whose wife had found out about their relationship, struggling with language and challenges in New York that she had not had to face in quite the same way in Puerto Rico. But in spite of her complicated personal life there was a simple, genuine, human kindness to this woman that came through.

One evening she came in to visit with me and she could see that I was discouraged. Worn out by needles and tubes and IV poles and indecent gowns, and urinals and plastic liners on the mattress that make you sweat especially when you have a fever.

I'd had it. I was fed up with the whole thing and starting to lay out the place settings for a really good pity party. Three times I'd had this surgery and I was weak and angry for not being home yet, and I hated the food, I didn't want to be there any more... and, well, you get the idea.

So what did she do? She told me that it was okay that I was angry. "Everybody gets angry in the hospital," she said, "don't you ever get mad at home? Why not here?"

"Look," she went on, "let me remake your bed, and let me get you some fresh water, and some jello, and if you need me anytime, just push that button." And then she freshened my linens, and plumped my pillows, and got me some water, and brought me some jello, and with just that much, the mood was broken and somehow I made it through the night after all.

Little checks written, small deeds, unimportant things that we do that don't add up to much, except that all of it taken together counts. That is, I think, how most of us lay down our life, expressing our faith. And maybe we say more than we realize in doing so.

I have spent thirty seven years in the ministry. Written and spoken lots of words over time. The shelves in my study are filled with books and I keep adding to them. Books with words all seeking to express in finite form an *Infinite Reality* that eludes description.

I have studied the confessions of the church, the early councils of Chalcedon and Nicaea that produced the Creeds. And I've poured over the sermons and lectures of the great preachers of the Christian tradition looking for better words than my own.

But for all of that, I am not sure that any of us, however, polished or informed as we may strive to be, can express faith better with our words than we can with our hands, with our eyes, with our compassion.

A group goes to Nicaragua and builds a small one room house for a family of five. Two volunteers spend the night in our homeless shelter. A friend cooks a meal and takes it to someone just home from the hospital. Small checks, little things really, that don't

add up to much, except that they do. In a busy, harried, late for the next appointment city like New York, they do.

Beverly Gaventa, a professor of New Testament studies at Princeton Seminary who is married to a Baptist minister, tells the story of her visit to a funeral home with her husband early in their marriage when a young couple like them had lost an eighteen month old daughter to a terrible illness. The couple were Beverly's husband's parishioners and he was called upon to care for them. Beverly remembers that she and Bill were new parents themselves and their son Matthew, now grown up and married himself, was only a year and one week old at the time, so it really struck home.

Beverly says that the inevitable identification of her son with the loss of this other young couple was so strong that as she and Bill approached the funeral home she began to cry. Once inside, the tears just kept coming. She went over to the open casket and shook with grief. There was no way to stop it.

Finally Bill asked her to come over and meet these young parents, and when she was introduced she couldn't speak, she just cried and cried and cried. Couldn't even say, "I'm sorry." She just cried.

Some time afterward Bill got a nice note of appreciation from the young mother who had lost her daughter. "I will never forget what your wife said," she wrote.

And isn't it the case that sometimes it's what we don't say that is so much more eloquent than what we do say?

The Christian faith would not spread nor its saving hope be shared if there were not the books and creeds and teachings and sermons and expositions of our faith that have been so finely crafted and expressed. But on the other hand not a word of it would have been believed if there were not even more eloquent expressions of it offered with our hands and with our hearts and with our tears and with our lives.

I have never been too concerned about the people who say that they cannot recite the confessions of faith that are printed in the bulletin from week to week as a part of our worship. I am far more concerned that people go out from worship and live it.

"We know love by this," the writer of I John says, "that Christ laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our life for one another."

¹ David HC Read, **This Grace Given**. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984. 115.