

One Flock, One Shepherd

John 10: 11-18

A good friend of mine loves to tell the story of two young boys who decided it would be a good idea to baptize the neighbors' cat. Because the boys were out of the Baptist tradition, there was no question as to the proper procedure: the cat would have to be fully immersed. So the boys filled a washtub with water, cornered the cat, and began all of the appropriate ministrations.

The cat, however, was not Baptist and did not intend to become one. The boys tried to dip him but he turned into a hissing demon, all claws and teeth. They tried a firmer grip, but it was like baptizing a briar patch—soon their clothes were in tatters and their forearms bleeding. The cat, meanwhile, was dry as a bone.

With one last effort, both boys took a firm hold, but the cat upset the wash tub, clawed one boy across the cheek and sank his teeth into the other's thumb.

“Well, that does it!” declared the older boy. “I say we just sprinkle him and let him GO to hell.”

My friend, who has some wisdom about him, likes to say that the joke is more than just a joke. It is a commentary on human nature.

The boys start out filled with zealous concern for the cat’s salvation—as long as the cat is a willing participant in the ceremony, they are eager to carry out the baptism. But when the cat with its different agenda proves uncooperative—difficult—hurtful and hard to handle—the boys’ concern turns quickly to contempt:

“If he won’t see the importance of being immersed...if he chooses not to see the rightness of our convictions and the righteousness of our cause—then we’ll just sprinkle him and let him go to hell.”

For my friend, the joke’s punch line has become code language for simply not caring enough about somebody else to continue to engage them: you just sprinkle them and let them go.

And we don't have to think very long to recognize how common the attitude is in our world today. I often speak in sermons about the sad blue versus red divide in our country's recent politics. Not a blue/red difference...there's always been a difference, and that's good: difference fuels debate and healthy debates drive progress.

We have had a blue/red DIVIDE. A Hatfield/McCoy feud.

And I can't help it—as a political science major, it fascinates me and as a theologian, it horrifies me, so I keep coming back to it. I guess, maybe I have to believe that we can preach the division away. But for now, it remains.

Political issues or political appointments make us an ANGRY nation, with that which divides us seemingly stronger than that which unites us.

Circulated emails from each side demonize the opposition...but we forward them. Talk radio hosts and even cable “news” networks like FOX and MSNBC fuel the ideological divide...but we watch. Policy debates are not dialogues aimed at understanding or compromise, they are shouted monologues aimed at clubbing the opponent into submission. And on our

worst days—blue looks at red and red looks at blue, and each says of the other--

“Just sprinkle them and let them go.....”, because holding on to each other hurts too much.

It would be nice if we could check the ideology at the door of the church, but we can't. I guess wherever two or more are gathered, there are two or more agendas. I've been in ministry for 15 years now, and for fifteen years, the Presbyterian Church USA has been helping to sell newspapers with its fight over whether homosexual persons may be ordained as elders and clergy. Each side of the debate has a biblical argument—and each side thinks the other is misreading scripture. So it's been a fifteen year family feud.

Don't think that you can avoid the discussion by going to a church down the street, however. The Methodists are wrestling with the issue, the Episcopalians are, the Lutherans are. And folks are tired and folks are hurting and folks are ANGRY, and you know where the Presbyterian vote lies right now?

Just about 50-50. Like oil and water, or Blue.....and Red....or Hatfields and McCoys. And some people are talking of how to take their church property and leave the denomination....because after all the cat fighting, each side is tempted to look at the other and say..."Just sprinkle them and let them go....".

Those are only two examples, of course, but picking others is like shooting fish in a barrel...this human tendency to sprinkle each other and let each other go is why we have wars...denominations....political parties....high school cliques...family feuds.....and failed relationships.

When caring starts to cost too much—too much effort, too much emotional energy...we choose to stop caring. When the going gets tough—we just get gone.

Now I offer this lengthy introduction to draw our attention to our scripture lesson and the contrasting message of Jesus Christ, who says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Five times in the seven verses of our scripture lesson, those words are repeated. “Lays down his life, I lay down my life, I lay down my life, I lay down my life, I lay it down of my own accord.”

The message is clear—I will love, I choose to love, no matter the cost. I will love, I choose to love, no matter the response. There is no limit. I lay down my life....for the sheep. I am—the good shepherd.

In the passage, Jesus draws a deliberate contrast to those whom he calls the hired hands: “The hired hand, who is NOT the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep, and the wolf scatters them. The hired hand runs away because the hired hand DOES NOT CARE—for the sheep.” When the cost gets too great, the hired hand will sprinkle the sheep—and let them go. The shepherd, by contrast, will NOT let go.

Now the very first news in that passage is unimaginably good news, for the sheep. Simply stated, there is no place that a sheep can wander where the good shepherd will cease to care....no lost place the sheep can find themselves where the good shepherd will not go; there is no place out of

reach, no state beyond care, no last chance, no lost cause, there is no one who is simply not worth the effort—the good shepherd will follow to the ends of the earth and will lay down his life for the sheep....”Don’t you know that there ain’t no mountain high enough, ain’t no valley low enough, ain’t no river wide enough to keep me from getting to you,” says Jesus.

That news is almost impossible to believe, for those of us who are used to discarding each other and those of us who expect to be discarded. God has loved us enough, in Christ Jesus, to seek us no matter the distance, to hold on to us no matter the cost, to love us to the end.

But if we read the good news carefully, it comes with an implied challenge. The good shepherd loves and seeks each sheep individually—but he seeks to gather them collectively. The shepherd’s intent is not to have countless flocks of one but to have one flock of countless number. As Paul states in Galatians chapter 3: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Paul does not mean that there are no longer differences—he means that Christ draws NO DISTINCTIONS. And that means, to the extent that we persist in drawing distinctions, emphasizing difference, and sprinkling our opponents and letting them go...we oppose the intentions of our risen Lord, savior, and shepherd, Jesus Christ.

And whenever we are convinced of the clarity of our theology, the certainty of our convictions, the righteousness of our positions, we hear the voice of Christ saying, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” You have no monopoly on me or on my love...you might even be wrong about some things.

All of this calls us beyond every “Can’t we all just get along,” Chicken Soup for the Soul, group hug type of platitude. It is a calling to Christ’s church to be Christ’s flock, drawn together by Christ’s love and showing Christ’s love—endlessly, lavishly, unconditionally, and sacrificially...to love when it’s hard and to love when it hurts.

Love even your enemies, Christ tells us—we don't get to sprinkle ANYONE and let them go, because the love we are showing is NOT our love, it is Christ's.

For me, that takes the faith—and puts teeth in it. How are we ever to do that? Imperfectly, I suppose. Humbly, I suppose. Loved by a love that will not let us go, I am certain. And convinced that that which unites us—is in fact stronger than anything that would divide us.

Amen.