

April 21, 2024
Good Shepherd Sunday
The Rev. Mark Pendleton
Christ Church, Exeter

God Cares and Loves

11“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The 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. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I 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. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No 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.” John 10:11-18

16We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17How 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? 18Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 23And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. 1 John 3:16-24

How much is a human life worth?

On a day when we hear about sheep and wolves, hired hands and very good shepherds, and how Christ laid down his life for us, we also hear this about the value of life. Jesus once said: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. 30 And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31 So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Matthew 10: 29 Our God counts and cares for sparrows, hairs on our head and the sheep of this and every flock.

Imagine having to calculate and count the value of human life almost every day when you go to work. That is the unenviable task of Kenneth Feinberg, an attorney who has come to some notoriety for his work after countless tragedies. He is the go-to person. After 9/11, he

was appointed Special Master of the Victim Compensation Fund. Remember the BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster in the Gulf of Mexico? For weeks the world watched a live video of millions of gallons leaking through the earth's surface. BP called in Feinberg. Boeing called him in 2019 when a 737 Max jet crashed. I sure hope the man has a supportive family and a few hobbies because I can't imagine the stress of this work -- putting dollar amounts to human life, suffering and injury.

In 2005 his book, titled "What is Life Worth?" Feinberg wrote about a widow of one of firefighters who died in the Twin Towers on 9/11: she cursed him, saying "I spit on you, and your children," for being unfair in his compensation awards. He wrote that "There is not one family member I've met who wouldn't gladly give back the check, or, in many cases, their own lives to have that loved one back. 'Happy' never enters into this equation."

Feinberg was hired by The One Fund to administer the 80 million dollars paid out to victims of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing.

I remember that day every April 15. It was my first day on the job as rector of Christ Church. Marathon Monday. I learned how close and interconnected the NH Seacoast was and is to the greater Boston region. When normally a first Sunday for a new rector would be a time of excitement and celebration, that day had to balance living through the shock of a tragedy with introducing myself to many of those gathered.

In our society today, there is much conversation and legislation around the question of when a human life begins. It will be one of the more debated and contested issues on the ballot this coming November and beyond.

Our denomination and faith tradition does not directly answer that question in ways that many have framed the issue today. But from the Book of Genesis, we know that God created humankind and blessed us and set us out to fill the earth. We are read how the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden. We read in these weeks of Easter how the risen Christ entered the room of his disciples and breathed on and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." John 20:22.

We may never fully understand the mystery of when life begins, but we fill in the gaps with the 'why' and even the 'how.'

Our entire faith is built on the radical notion that this unseen God loves and cares for the creation that God made and all that is within in. We learn about this through Scripture. The first thing I did when I had my own spiritual awakening at the age of 20 was to read the Bible, because I was without a foundation of knowing the whole story.

And one of the prime images and reminders of this image and promise is all the Good Shepherd language that we bask in every year three Sundays after Easter Day.

The 23rd psalm never disappoints.

Yesterday at a gathering of our men's group, we read from Eugene Peterson's always interesting version in *The Message*:

God, my shepherd!
 I don't need a thing.
 You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
 you find me quiet pools to drink from.
 True to your word,
 you let me catch my breath
 and send me in the right direction.

God: you let me catch my breath even today in a world that swirls with the relentless saturation of information and news, heartache and challenges, beauty and opportunities to be grateful for the blessings we receive. Send me in the right direction.

As we stake our claim to believe in a God who loves us and cares for us, we might also ask: if God and Jesus care so much for each human life, why does it seem at times that life itself can seem so value-less, fragile and dispensable.

It is pretty clear: 1 John 3:23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.

We are now seven months into the war in Israel and Gaza. Beyond the prayers we offer, I have not spoken about the ongoing violence for some time in great depth in sermons, yet I know it is on our minds. How do we live in the shadow of the horrible attacks on Israel on October 7th – 1600 people killed and hostages still unaccounted for -- while also hearing about subsequent deaths of upwards of 30,000 people in Gaza, many of them children.

Sparrows, sheep, the hairs on innocent heads.

When foreign aid workers from the World Central Kitchen laid down their lives for the people they are trying to service, providing food for the starving population, the outrage at their deaths was not surprising. They were living out what we read today in 1 John 3: 17 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? 18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

With all the heaviness far and wide, the fourth Sunday of Easter is an annual needed balm for the wounds of the world and food for the soul.

Do these ancient pastoral images still speak to us?

Jesus is a good shepherd who calls us and is the one who we should follow wherever he leads. We are led, we hope, to green pastures and still waters. And should we encounter

evil, fear, pain or harm – and our own personal valleys of the shadow of death – our hope and trust is that we will know that we are not alone. The staff and the rod of the shepherd can guide and direct and comfort.

Notice how we have four main characters in today's gospel: the hired hand, the wolf, the shepherd and the sheep.

12The 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. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

We have all probably hired someone to do so something for us at some point in our lives: clean our house, watch our kids, walk the dogs, plan a trip, drive us to an appointment and help us study for a big exam or haul away all the stuff that has piled up on our basements or garages. When and if we really trust someone we hire, we might actually give them a key to the house or allow them to drive our car. But that trust is often built after some time of watching. Are they reliable? Do they care enough about the people we most love to, in the words of the gospel, even “lay down their life.”

1 John comes from out of the same community that produced John's gospel. We hear phrases like “my little children” and “beloved.” It also lifts up some basic theology to clear through all dogma and doctrine: 4:16 God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.

V. 21 Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

In our limitations and brokenness and imperfections, you and I are still called to do what we can.

Maybe we will never be asked to lay down our lives for others. And still there are people who sacrifice themselves every day all around us. I think about how dangerous it is work on our highways repairing the roads with more distracted drivers among us. I remember the nurses and doctors and orderlies – some members of our own congregation – who cared for the sick in the early days of the Pandemic not always knowing that the infection load would cost them their health and their lives. Saints are all around us.

Let us never stop following where the shepherd leads.