
DISPOSITION OF DISCIPLESHIP
JOHN 10:11-18 AND 1 JOHN 3:16-24
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 2024
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For forty days, the church fasted for Lent. For fifty days, the church celebrates Easter. We continue in this season of celebration today as we listen and learn more and more about what it means to live in the light that shines forth from Jesus's resurrection. It's Eastertide. As the front box of the worship guide reminds us, on this fourth Sunday of Easter each year, the lessons from the lectionary provide an image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In today's Gospel, Jesus says directly, "I am the Good Shepherd." Now I'm not sure about you, but I'm not that familiar with the realities of sheep and shepherding. I can't even remember the last time I was around sheep. Maybe the State Fair? But don't worry, I'm not about to give a lesson on herding or on the intricacies of the life of sheep, as interesting as that may be. Instead, I want us to consider for a time this morning what the Gospel says about Jesus being the Good Shepherd, and what the implications of this are for the lives of those who follow him.

First, let's consider the context of Jesus saying he is the Good Shepherd. In chapter 9 of John's Gospel, we hear the story of Jesus healing a man who had been blind from birth. With that miraculous mud mixture of spit and sand caked on his eyes, Jesus sends the blind man to wash and be healed. As Jesus's healing miracles often did, healing this blind man caused a scene. People were amazed, the disciples had theological questions, and the religious leaders were upset at Jesus for healing on the sabbath. After interrogating the man, those religious leaders drove him out, but Jesus went and found him. He called the man to follow after him, and the man believed and worshipped. Jesus went on to interpret this healing sign to the religious leaders and those listening by talking about shepherding.

As it turns out, the physical healing of this man is as much about belonging as it is about seeing.¹ The man was invited into the sheepfold. He was invited to be one of those who hear and follow Jesus. Just as the man heard Jesus's command to wash in the pool and be healed, Jesus's commands for his sheep, for those who follow him, are for our good and for life. Jesus says his followers will come in and go out and find pasture because he came to give his followers abundant life. The Good Shepherd is good because he invites us to come into a space where we may experience life, and life abundantly.

The Good Shepherd is also good because he provides the most secure kind of belonging for those who hear his calling and follow. Jesus says the sheep belong to the Good Shepherd, so he is protective of them. Now Jesus isn't just a little protective. He's the kind of protective that puts everything on the line. Like a fire fighter who enters a burning building to rescue someone who is trapped, Jesus puts himself at risk for the good of the sheep. As Jesus says, "The good shepherd

¹ Karoline Lewis, "Commentary on John 10:11-18," Working Preacher, Accessed on April 18, 2024, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-1011-18-6>.

lays down his life for the sheep.” Later in the book of John, Jesus says that no one has greater love than to lay down one’s life for a friend (John 15:13). So, we could say the Good Shepherd loves his sheep with the greatest possible love. You see, because the sheep belong to the Good Shepherd, he won’t run from their side when trouble comes. Their safety and their remaining in the fold mean everything to the Good Shepherd, that’s what love looks like. We all are familiar with the kinds of trouble that can come into life that make you feel like you’re being eaten alive or scattered far from your community of belonging. Allow one of those things to come to mind, the thing that terrifies you the very most, that feels the most threatening to your very being. Yeah, that thing. Jesus says, he will lay down his life, so you aren’t left alone with that thing. The predators still come. The valley of the shadow of death and the places where evil resides are still there, but the promise of the Good Shepherd is he won’t leave his sheep, he won’t leave you, alone. He will lay his life down for you, and this is love.

Of course, this is good news for those who have heard Jesus’s voice and followed. This is good news for those who are Jesus’s sheep, his disciples. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, loves us, loves you, with his life. **And**—I say “and” because it is not a “yet” or a “but”—this good news comes with responsibility. Or should I say, that because of this good news, followers of Jesus are response-enabled. You see, those who have followed the good shepherd to green pastures and still waters where our souls are restored, and who have walked through dark valleys without fear of evil where we’ve received the comfort of the Lord, and who have sat at tables with our enemies where our cups have overflowed, we are called and enabled by God’s grace to be imitators of the Good Shepherd. Standing in the line of the Gospel of John, the writer of 1 John put it like this: We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—**and** we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

Let’s attend closely to this verse, and to today’s reading from 1 John, as it displays for us the disposition of discipleship. That is to say, it tells us something crucial about the inherent qualities of the mind and character of those who follow Jesus. It tells us about the inclinations and tendencies of those who are tended by and who attend to the Good Shepherd. The author says that the standard of what love looks like is Jesus laying down his life for us. And while gratitude for this gift is surely part of what it means to receive this gift of love, 1 John says there is more required of us. Now for anyone who gets antsy about “oughts” or “shoulds” or “obligations” when it comes to discipleship, you might want to buckle up because this could get a bit bumpy. What the writer actually says is, we owe it to lay down our lives for one another. Jesus’s love for us has put us in a debt to each other. As one author puts it, in Jesus, we are free to be bound to one another. (*Free to Be Bound: Church Beyond the Color Line* by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove)

The letter of 1 John is packed with big ideas and some of the most beautiful truths of the New Testament. The author penned truths like, “God is love,” and “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” But sometimes truths this grand and ideas as big as love hover above the ground without making it to the practical realities of everyday life. So when we hear that because of Jesus’s love for us, we owe it to lay down our lives for each other, it is easy enough to spiritualize our obligation to one another, leaving it just beyond the place of actually costing us anything. Yet, as if the writer knew our tendency toward keeping love slightly impractical and our tendency to hold on to our life rather than lay it down, he

gives a very practical example. The translation in your pew Bibles puts it like this: “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?” A more literal translation says, “But whoever has the goods of the world and sees his sibling possessing a need and/yet closes his insides against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” To drive it home even further, Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase goes like this, “If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear.” Ouch.

Sometimes the fine points of discipleship, while good, are sharp and demanding. The writer summarizes the ethos of this practical example, of this challenging question about whether God’s love is living in us, by saying, “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Love is not love unless it is lived. And by living this love, we will know we are from the truth, and we can live in that assurance even when we’re not feeling it.

This teaching makes it clear that there is a cost to discipleship. But sometimes we’re closed off to it. In November, I challenged the Chapel Scholars—the group of about 90 students who regularly engage with Chapel programs as they grow in their life with Christ—to read the book of 1 John every day for the whole month. If you’ve never tried this kind of spiritual practice before, I strongly recommend it. My common practice was to listen on the Bible App while I was driving to or from work. One day on my way home I pulled up to an intersection near my house, where a man was panhandling—asking for money because he was in need. And wouldn’t you know it, 1 John Chapter 3 was playing through the speakers of my car. I looked at this man asking for money, knowing full well the only cash I had in my wallet was a \$20 bill, and I heard these words: “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (ESV) Now I wish I could tell you in that moment I reached into my wallet and grabbed the \$20 and handed it to the man in a small act of love. But I didn’t. Though the Spirit was prompting me to give as an act of faithfulness, I closed my heart. I’ve certainly found that one of the best ways to delay or deny faithfulness or to shut myself off on the inside is to over-think or over-analyze the situation. Maybe that works for you, too. Looking at this man, I called to mind that the poverty that leads to being unhoused is complex. I remembered that experts often recommend that instead of giving money to someone begging, it’s best to give to a non-profit working to address the root causes of the person’s plight. And I knew that if I gave the money to that man he would have been free to use it on whatever he desired—perhaps food or short-term shelter, or perhaps something far worse for his mind and body. All of those things are true, and they make for good reasons why not always to give cash to people who ask for it. But in that moment, instead of having a heart opened to my neighbor and to the prompting of the Spirit, I did what Matthew Desmond, the author of *Poverty, by America*, says the powerful often do: I retreated to the refuge of complexity.² Rather than following the one whose resurrection power has changed the world, rather than taking refuge in God’s love, rather than finding refuge in the sheepfold of God, I closed myself off to the detriment of the man and me.

What I needed in that moment was not more knowledge or more information. I needed Divine open-heart surgery—the kind that opens our hearts to live God’s love. I needed the reality

² Matthew Desmond, *Poverty, by America* (New York: Crown, 2023), 44.

of Jesus's life-laying-down-love to grip my innermost being, so that I would look on my brother and love in deed and truth. While I know there is much grace—and boy was I thankful to have the time of confession and pardon in worship that next Sunday—I also know God calls us to lay down our lives, to follow him no matter the cost. It's the disposition of discipleship to imitate the Good Shepherd, to follow his lead, to be open hearted toward our brothers and sisters. And I didn't choose that.

Perhaps it's also the disposition of discipleship to remember that we are often more like sheep than we are like the Good Shepherd, wandering slightly further afield than we ought, slow to respond to commands, and even going the wrong way at times. At this point, you may be saying, "Preacher, I think you forgot that at the beginning of the sermon you said it was Eastertide and not Lent. But this sermon sure sounds a lot like a sermon for the repentance of Lent instead of a celebration of the resurrection." Well, here's the truth of it: even in our need to confess our failures in following the Good Shepherd, to confess our downfalls in discipleship, to confess our lack of lived love, we find the goodness of the resurrection even there. You see hearing the calling to lay down our lives reminds us again and again of the one who not only laid down his life for his sheep, but took it up again in the resurrection. This gives us hope to follow him all the way from our loveless-ways and death to new life.

The writer of 1 John captures this movement in chapter 1, saying if we confess our sins, that is our failures to live God's love, God is faithful and just to forgive us. As it turns out, even at our moments of deepest regret and failure, the Good Shepherd is there, laying down his life, that we might be free to love again. Now that's something worth celebrating. Happy Eastertide. Amen.