

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2B13
4 Easter (Year B) 11:00 a.m. Online Worship
24

Acts 4:5-12
Psalm 23
1 John 3:16-

Sunday 25 April 2021 Good Shepherd Sunday Jeffrey Hookom retires

John 10:11-18

Is Religion a Form of Mental Illness? My Faith in the Good Shepherd

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want" (Psalm 23).

1. "When I was born the common view was that nurture decided almost everything. In the decades that followed the emphasis shifted to nature. In the last twenty years, people have talked more broadly about the way nature and nurture propel each other... but having children has made me wonder if a third element is involved, some unknowable inflection of spirit or divinity." Tomorrow's Forum guest Andrew Solomon wrote these words in his book about exceptional children in ordinary families called *Far from the Tree*.¹

It is one of the most important books I have read in the last decade with chapters titled "Deaf," "Dwarfs," "Down Syndrome," "Autism," "Disability," "Prodigies," "Rape," "Crime," "Transgender." He writes about how important it is for parents of severely disabled children to believe in something bigger than one's self, something like God.² He feels convinced that love does not come in finite quantities but that every kind of love ultimately supports other kinds of love.

Solomon writes about the "great social experiment called *deinstitutionalization*" which reduced the number of people suffering from schizophrenia in long-term custodial care in the United States from more than a half a million in 1950 to some forty thousand today.³ Now "150,000 people with schizophrenia are homeless; one in five people with schizophrenia is homeless in any given year."⁴

Solomon explains the isolation and loneliness of schizophrenia. Usually this disease emerges in late adolescence after parents and children have bonded. He writes that like Alzheimer's it is, "an illness not of accrual but of replacement and deletion, rather than obscuring the previously known person, this disease to some extent eliminates that person." He explains the tragedy of this disease which can, "take away the ability to connect to or love or trust another person, the full use rational intelligence... the basic faculty of physical self-care and large areas of self-awareness and analytic clarity."

Solomon says, "Most famously, the schizophrenic disappears into an alternative world of voices that he erroneously perceives to be external." Sometimes this person experiences

visual and even olfactory hallucinations that, “make a world full of actual threats into a writhing hell of inescapable terrorization.”⁵

Not too infrequently I run across people who say that religion is a form of mental illness. I do not think that I have ever experienced hallucinations but I do have a tangible sense that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is with me and guiding me. On this Good Shepherd Sunday I want to talk about what that feels like. Let’s begin by remembering how Jesus describes himself and then study the practical spirituality of Psalm 23.

2. In the world of the Gospel of John, Jesus uses seven “I am” statements to describe himself. The narrator points to seven signs that show who Jesus is. The sign associated with Jesus’ statement “I am the Good Shepherd”(Jn. 10) involves the healing of a man born blind. This action offends religious leaders because they feel threatened by Jesus’ popularity and fault him for healing someone on the sabbath, a time set aside in according to the Ten Commandments for rest. The leaders then try to intimidate the formerly blind man’s family and ultimately, when he speaks the truth about what happened, they cast him out of the community.

So when Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd” he echoes the warning of other prophets in the Bible (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel). He implies that we ourselves can be like bad shepherds who use relationships to enrich ourselves and build up our ego. Or we can be like the Good Shepherd who, without self-interest, serves others.

In the verse before our reading Jesus plainly says, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). For me this is the ultimate test of our intuitions and inner life. Are our thoughts leading us into peace, into intimacy with God and a deeper contribution of kindness to the community? That is what we were created for, that is abundant life.

Jesus makes one other absolutely crucial and frequently ignored point. He says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (Jn. 10). The word for fold (aulē) also means courtyard, it refers to another set aside space.

We have such a terrible tendency to divide ourselves into groups, to form our identity by seeing ourselves in opposition to other people. Here Jesus refers to one of the greatest mysteries at the heart of God. That is, we do not know how any other person is connected to God. This saying reminds me of the validity of other religions and other pathways to the Holy. It helps me to stay humble in what I know, to be open to hearing wisdom from any source.

In summary John's Gospel teaches us three things about encountering the Good Shepherd. First, this involves a call to serving, not using, others. Second, it leads to abundant life (which is intimacy with God and our neighbor). Finally, it respects the sheep God has in other folds.

3. This is what we know theoretically about God from the teaching of Jesus. But Christianity has never been chiefly about dogma, doctrines or ideas. It is not primarily correct thinking or belief but rather a relationship with Jesus. I listen to my life. I ask for God's help and guidance. And as I do this I have a picture in my mind which comes from Psalm 23. Philip Keller wrote a simple little book about how his experience as a shepherd influenced his understanding of the psalm.

Many of us most of the time operate under a set of assumptions about ourselves. We might regard ourselves as reasonable, free, likeable, understanding, as moderately clever. We think, "I might not be perfect but I'm pretty okay." But when we say to ourselves, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." Suddenly we assume a different position, as sheep.

Keller points out that sheep are silly creatures, prone to getting lost, over-grazing, eating poisonous plants. More pointedly they are helpless, timid, feeble creatures, whose only strategy for danger is to run like mad. Sheep can become "cast" or "cast down." This happens when by accident a sheep becomes stuck on its back with its feet in the air unable to right itself. The sheep will die in a matter of hours in the wrong kind of weather. In short sheep by their nature need help and we do too.⁶

Who is this Lord, this manager or owner of sheep? The Psalm answers this question. "The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures... He restores my soul... He leads me along right pathways" (Ps. 23). It may not have occurred to you but good pastures do not simply come into being on their own. The shepherd cultivates them. Keller's neighbor was a terrible shepherd, as a bad manager of the land, his sheep were malnourished and huddled at the fence looking jealously in at Keller's green pastures.

Sheep need four things in order to be able to lie down. They need to be free from fear, conflict with one another, pests (like nose flies) and hunger. The shepherd provides this. The psalm goes on saying, "Your rod and your staff they comfort me." The rod is a kind of club for fighting off wolves. The staff rescues sheep from dangerous cliffs or thickets, and helps to separate the sheep so that the shepherd can inspect their health. The staff even can be a kind of connection between human and animal as they walk along, almost like holding hands.

The constant question of our life is this: are we going to be the Lord's sheep? Those who choose the Good Shepherd over and over through a lifetime find themselves changed. They shall not be in want. Their cup is running over. They are content. Because of what God does in them, "goodness and mercy" follows them all the days of their life. This kind of person seeks God in prayer and finds the Holy Spirit near at hand. This person conveys joy, gratefulness and serenity.

We all know people like this. In fact, today we are celebrating just such a person, one of the greatest Christians I know. Today is the last Sunday before Jeffrey Hookom retires. He would be embarrassed if I went on too much at length, but for me he exemplifies the best qualities that come from humbly devoting oneself to the Good Shepherd. For fifteen years Jeffrey has worked here at the Cathedral. He has fantastic gifts for organizing tasks and volunteers. He is deeply creative in planning the worship that draws us close to God. He is better at dealing with difficult people than almost anyone. In retirement I expect him to be a cherished friend of the Cathedral for a long time.

Before we conclude let me tell you about a neighbor I had for fourteen years. Keith was gaunt from walking hundreds of miles each month through suburban streets. He was dark-skinned from constantly being in the sun. And he was deeply distrusted by nearly everyone because his behavior seemed a little odd. He constantly wrote in a little notebook and this made people nervous. They stayed away, gossiped and even called the police.

Keith suffers from schizophrenia and I am so grateful that we became friends. We both paid close attention to ordinary things. I still appreciate his gentle manner, his questions and the way that he cared about me. I am so grateful that the Good Shepherd has opened my life to encounters like this.

Am I crazy to talk to God, or to listen to inner promptings that I believe come from the Good Shepherd? I don't know. But I do know that when I have walked through the valley of the shadow of death, God has not abandoned me. God revives my soul.

Maybe the question is not "are we crazy?" but rather what can we do for the people around us who are struggling? Love does not come in finite quantities for us to save or conserve. Every act of love strengthens all other kinds of love. Let us walk in joy with our Good Shepherd so that we may have life and have it abundantly.

¹ Andrew Solomon, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (NY: Scribner, 2012)

² "Paradoxically, however, parents of disabled children often achieve a feeling of control by making a firm and positive affirmation of their lack of control. The most important thing, often, is a belief in something

bigger than one's own experience. The most common source of coherence is religion, but it has many mechanisms. You can believe in God, in the human capacity for good, in justice, or simply love." "Some people are trapped by the belief that love comes in finite quantities, and that our kind of love exhausts the supply upon which they need to draw. I do not accept competitive models of love, only additive ones." Ibid., 371 and 700.

³ Ibid., 314.

⁴ It probably goes without saying that from 1950 to 2010 the population increased from 157.8 million to 312.2 million. Ibid., 329.

⁵ Ibid., 295.

⁶ W. Philip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1970, 2007) 70ff.