

In John's gospel, Jesus is known for making pronouncements. In the other gospels, he spends a lot of time teaching, or speaking in parables. But here, he just announces things that are seemingly disconnected from the action going on around him. They aren't disconnected, of course. This is a very complex piece of literature. But at first glance, it seems disconnected.

I am the Good Shepherd.

This is one of Jesus' "I AM" statements in John's gospel. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the vine, you are the branches. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world.

Many of the "I AM" claims are ambitious, to say the least, and caused their own set of problems for Jesus. Resurrection and the Life? He will have death threats in full force after he makes that claim and brings Lazarus back from death.

But the Good Shepherd claim would have seemed out of place in the list for a first century audience. Even though King David had started as a shepherd, and even though shepherds were invited to the manger in Bethlehem, shepherds were not people of high esteem. To claim that you are a shepherd is to align yourself with people who are on the outside. People who society has decided it can do without—"hey you! Why don't you take my sheep and go live with them in the hills for months on end. I'm too important to do this task, but nobody will miss you."

Perhaps today, Jesus would say, "I AM the good migrant farm worker". Or "I AM the good homeless man."

By claiming "shepherd" status, Jesus makes a radical claim.

First, he warns people that his kingship is best understood when you realize that worldly power and prestige are not his model. He explicitly claims a position of servitude, humility, and exclusion.

Second, he connects himself to the tradition of David. Yes, he is a king from the line of David. But he harkens back to David as shepherd boy. Not David on a throne.

Third, he evokes Hebrew Scriptures to add another layer to their understanding. In Ezekiel 34, God says, "I, myself, will be the shepherd of my sheep." (Ezek. 34:15)

And in Ezekiel, the reason God becomes the shepherd for God's own sheep is because the leaders of the people, the shepherds, had been doing a terrible job. The sheep were scattered, they didn't have food to eat, and they were under attack.

So, for Jesus to become the shepherd of his own people is to criticize the job the current leaders were doing. They become the thieves and bandits in this passage in John's gospel.

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Jesus evokes his Davidic kingship as he evokes Ezekiel to condemn the religious leaders.

The message would have been clear. And would NOT have been well received by the leaders of the day. In a few more verses, the authorities will try to stone him.

The language of Jesus as Shepherd also evokes a Psalm. Perhaps the most comforting and familiar passage in all of the scriptures. The 23rd Psalm, which we sang earlier this morning.

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: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Jesus uses these familiar pictures we have of God to give us a new way to understand his death and resurrection. By laying down his life for his sheep, Jesus makes clear that his crucifixion is not an accident or a tragedy. It is what Jesus chooses to do for his flock. He is not a victim. In John's gospel, he marches to the cross with determination. And his actions are not to be controlled by his followers.

"I 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."

Whenever we try to claim our shepherd exclusively, we should remember these words.

Claiming 'one shepherd' is not as hard to do, but to claim 'one flock' is hard. I don't want to be in a flock with everyone who claims Jesus as shepherd. That is my confession to you.

God may be preparing a table for me in the presence of my enemies, but that doesn't mean I want to sit next to them at the table. Yet Jesus claims there is to be one flock, and one shepherd.

So we continue to pray for reconciliation. We continue to pray for redemption and for restored relationships.

And, if Jesus is the Shepherd, then the role of the sheep today's lesson is being played by...us.

It is uncomfortable to see ourselves as sheep. They aren't known for being the brightest animals in the barnyard. And we like to further the illusion that we are in control of our own hillside wanderings. But the reality is that sheep need to be led. I have spent no time as a shepherd, but I hear that if a sheep walks into a dead end, it will just stop. It won't turn around. It will just wait for someone to come lead it back to a better path. How often are we like that? We keep running into walls and don't stop to turn around. Walls of abuse. Walls of self destruction. Walls of arrogance and greed.

And, even though the imagery of the shepherd language is so rich, even though we can see fluffy white sheep gamboling about on the verdant hillsides, we should try not to keep these passages only in the realm of metaphor.

Because while we are *like* sheep sometimes, our instructions from these passages should not only be seen as metaphor. Elsewhere in this gospel, Jesus says "Feed my sheep". And that can make one think of providing spiritual nourishment—teaching, leading, etc. And it is that. But spiritual nourishment isn't going to help someone who literally needs feeding.

Sometimes "feed my sheep" means bringing food for the food pantry here. It means giving a homeless person a sandwich.

Our passage from 1 John is a reminder to "keep it real".

“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

The image of Jesus laying down his life is carried over from the Gospel to this letter. “We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

But how did Jesus lay down his life for us?

By dying a gruesome death on a cross.

So, if we should fight our tendency to turn the sheep images into metaphors, we should really fight our tendency to say that laying down our lives for each other only involves our being nice to each other or something like that.

Laying down our lives for each other is how we know love. And there is nothing in these texts that suggests it is easy or casual. And, quite frankly, if you combine this commandment with Jesus’ reminder in the Shepherd passage that there are other sheep in his fold, the implications are tough. For me at least.

Because it is pretty easy for me to love the sheep in this fold. You are fun to be with. We get along. We are simpatico.

But it is often much easier to be angry than to sacrificially love the people who are in Jesus’ other flocks. And the people who are the “other” sheep are likely different for you than they are for me. But this week, please consider who the “other” sheep are for you.

But as I’ve struggled with this First John text this week, what has become horribly clear to me is that “in a time of schism and dissent, what is most threatening is that Christians should continue pontificating about love while they turn hatefully from one another and ignore each other’s needs.” (David Bartlett in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2*, page 445).

Because that is the other truth in this First John lesson. “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” While words can hurt and harm people, and while we should be careful about what we say, the truth is that we will be known by our actions. That is how we will be remembered.

In a few minutes we will come together at the Table. It is not our table. It is the table of the one shepherd and it is for all of his flock. The very act of communion is a way of living in “truth and action”.

It may seem symbolic, and in some ways it is, but it is a good beginning. Because the truth is that humanity has a bad record when it comes to loving each other in truth and action.

We’ve created entire denominations, TV networks, and political parties designed to divide and separate. But Christ keeps calling us together. We can’t look to our own instincts, but are called to look to Christ.

“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us. . . .”

As we prepare to come to the table, let us consider our truths and actions. Let us ask Christ to guide our hearts to make room at the table for all of Christ’s flock.

St. Francis of Assisi once said, “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

Let us love in a way that our truth and our actions, not our words, will bring the gospel into our community and in our world.