

Qualities of a True Shepherd

Sermon on John 10, 11-18

Dear friends in Christ, good people of Westerly,

1. Tom & Luke

I came across a story of two school boys recently, Tom & Luke. They were Highschoolers on their way home after school. Tom was carrying a huge amount of books with him, and a bag with his sports-gear. He tripped and fell, spilled all of his belongings on the sidewalk. Luke saw him fall, came up to him and helped him gather his things. The two went on together and began talking. When they came to Luke's home, Luke invited his new acquaintance in for soft-drinks and video-games. The two spent the afternoon together, talked, played and had a good time. During this time Luke did notice that Tom seemed burdened with worry, had problems with his parents and with school. When dinner-time came, Tom said he had to get home, thanked Luke for a fun afternoon and left.

Tom & Luke met each other in school and hung out together every once in a while, played video games, watched TV or practiced catching with the baseball, nothing much. A few years passed and as they neared graduation, Tom said he wanted to talk. When they were alone, Tom said: *"Remember the first time we met, when I tripped and everything I had fell down. Did you ever ask yourself why I was carrying so much stuff home that day? You see, I cleaned out my locker because I didn't want to leave a mess for anyone else. I had stored away some of my mother's sleeping pills, and I was going home to commit suicide that day."*

Tom went on saying that after spending the afternoon with Luke, he didn't want to die any more. He said: *"I would have missed that time with you and many other good times in my life that followed. I'm trying to say, Luke, you did a lot more for me when you helped me that day. **You saved my life.**"*

To me this is a beautiful story of care and compassion. When we offer kindness to our fellow human beings, we never know what effects our care might have on them. Luke was simply a caring fellow student – and with his decision to reach out to Tom, deeply affected his life!

2. *Compassion*

I believe compassion is the core – the very heart of our humanity and faith. To quote Marcus Borg, my favorite New Testament scholar: “*Compassion is the central virtue of a life centered in God as known in Jesus. When Jesus in a few words summarized theology and ethics, the character of God, and how we should live he said, ‘Be compassionate as God is compassionate’ [Luke 6:36]*”.

In our Gospel-text for today John also talks about caring deeply and uses the imagery of a shepherd who cares SO much about his sheep, that he would lay down his life for them. John uses the language of intimate, loving knowledge and deep connection to describe this relationship: “*I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.*” In other words: Jesus, the shepherd, includes his sheep into the loving connection he has established with God. This inclusion is a knowing, intimate bond of belonging. Because they are so deeply connected, because the shepherd cares so deeply about his sheep, he is willing to stay by their side when things become dangerous, he is willing to defend them against danger, such as deadly enemies (wolves) or abandonment – even if this means that he will lose his life.

In John 15,13 a few chapters after our text, we can find the same idea expressed in other words: “*Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*”

The word “compassion” is a Latin word and literally means “*to suffer with*” someone, but not in the sense of suffering for the sake of suffering, nor in the sense of having pity with others, or merely sympathy. That would simply be a way of distancing ourselves from another’s pain. Compassion sees and recognizes another’s suffering fully *and* wants to do something about it, eliminate it, if possible. That is what Jesus did with us humankind: He became one of us, he shared the joys and pleasures of being human with us, and he did not shy away from pain or suffering. As Jesus says in our text today: He willingly lay down his life for his sheep since that was what was required of him as a “good shepherd.”

3. *Compassion is womb-like*

Marcus Borg, the New Testament scholar I mentioned earlier says that in biblical languages, the Aramaic that Jesus spoke and in Old Testament Hebrew, the word

'love' and 'compassion' have a deeper connotation, beyond caring deeply for someone: in the Bible compassion is related to the word for *womb*:

“In Hebrew a woman's womb is a *rechem* (רֶחֶם), and the verb, ‘to show compassion [רחם] is formed from this same word. So, to show compassion is to ‘womb someone,’ that is, to treat them with care and love such as a devoted mother gives to the child within her.” (Borg)

To be womb-like means to feel what a mother feels for the children of her womb: tenderness, willing her children's well-being, willing the well-being of Creation or the natural world, and, of course, finding her children precious and beautiful. Being *compassionate* has nuances of giving life, nourishing, caring, perhaps embracing and encompassing. Womb-like does NOT mean weak, or fragile, quite the opposite: This womb-like compassion can have the strength, passion and fierceness of a mother protecting her child like a tiger, *or* the determination of a shepherd to protect the lives of her sheep!

4. Mother & daughter, side by side

As you all know I work in a large hospital in Boston as a chaplain. Recently we had a very moving story unfold on our transplant floor. A 67 y/o female had severe kidney disease and needed a new kidney, if she wanted to survive. As you may know, there are not enough organ donors in our country to even closely meet the need of donor organs, so there are long lists of patients waiting for a kidney, a liver or heart. This patient was not able to find a donor-kidney that matched her blood-type, so things looked grim for her. Then her daughter had herself tested and the family realized that she was a perfect match. The daughter wanted to donate one of her kidneys, as people can live comfortably with one kidney. Her mother refused her donation: “*I can't take a kidney out of the body of my perfectly healthy daughter and endanger her health,*” she said to me in a conversation. Her daughter insisted: “*I would not be alive if it weren't for your love and your willingness to carry me in your womb. The least I can do is to make it possible for you to live many more years and for us to enjoy your company among us.*”

I'm not sure what I would do if I were involved in such a case, dear friends. How would you decide if you could or needed to give your kidney away?

This family went through with their plan. For several weeks we had mother and daughter lying in the same room side by side: The mother getting used to her new life, thanks to her donated kidney; the daughter healing from the operation that cut out her kidney. The two patients did well and were very happy that they had decided as they had. If that is not a story of wonderful compassion and deep care from both sides!

5. *God's passion for justice and peace*

Our biblical story today is all about God's passion and compassion for our world. I would like to invite you all to ponder the image we are presented with today: ***God loves each of us like a good mother loves, cares for and protects the child in her womb that she wants to carry and bring to life.*** Imagine the compassion, the care, the tender kindness God feels towards each of us, God's beloved children!

And imagine that in response to the gift of love, in response to God's grace and God's tender compassion we would carry that same compassionate care into the world, into the context we each will return to today: our homes, our work environments on Monday, our families, our neighborhoods, our towns, our state and our country?

After all, we hear that a being a good shepherd is not only a feeling of tenderness, *but a doing*, an activity of transformation, an effort to make our world more just, more peaceful, more safe, more welcoming, more nourishing - filled with more of that incredible, ferocious, caring love and motherly protection! May it be so, dear friends, may it be so!

Amen!