



Sermon for Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

Good friends, continuing joy and wonder to you all! Christ is risen! In these 50 days of Easter season, this is Good Shepherd Sunday. We have some sheep here with me! Well, some stuffed sheep – a little white lambie, and a floofy black sheep. As we take heart from Spring blooming all around us, we celebrate today that Jesus is the Good Shepherd – for us and for all humankind.

This last week, there have been two names in our minds with the high-profile trial and its final judgment. We know the names well. George Floyd... Derek Chauvin...

We have seen and felt strong, intense responses and reactions to the outcome of this trial, and to the slow taking of life that was recorded for us all to see.

Many, many people are deeply relieved.

Many are glad, even celebrating a sense of justice delivered.

Some are worried, pensive, uncertain about what this really means.

Among some police, wondering what to think because they saw in the video an enactment of how they have been trained.

So many are sensing hope that since at least once, when evidence was so overwhelmingly compelling, a decision results in life-changing consequences, there will be a taking stock and a change in how things are handled.

These are the strong, intense responses, just some of them.

The evening when the jury's verdict was announced, as I headed out of town, I saw a man in his 30s marching alone toward town holding a flagstaff with the yellow "Don't tread on me" flag, clearly ready to take his own stand in oppositional response to the trial's results.

Across our country, and in our own region, especially among Black Americans but across all races, there has been a collective sigh that is not of complete relief but just of some relief and breathing just a bit more easily, even while recognizing work that still needs to be done.

Reactions and responses are just that.

People will have their responses.

Responses can be instructive. And sometimes, we need to give people space to have their responses.

It may be instructive to officers to have a response of worry and wondering. What does this mean for me, when I was trained certain way and now I need to think about it differently?

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Indeed.

Sometimes, silence can be the best response. Not a silence of nodding assent. Not a silence of hostile disagreement. Rather, the empty silence of letting someone's questioning response and discomfort just sit unanswered, letting it all seep down and through one's heart and mind and body.

The apostles were brought up before rulers who didn't like the fact that they were healing people. In a moment of public shaming, when they were pushed to back up their actions – Actions of healing, not of harming! Actions of bringing sight to the blind and raising the lame to walk, of empowering people, not of snuffing out their power and life! – when they were pushed to back up their actions, what did they do? They spoke the truth. And they spoke the deeper truth that held up a mirror that made these powerful people uncomfortable. "We stand before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ, **whom you crucified**, whom God raised from the dead." We stand before you in the name of the One you rejected and killed, who has become the anchor and foundation for everything that is now going to happen.

Part of the Christian life is speaking truth – even truth that is uncomfortable. But this bold, truthful speaking (as we find in the book of Acts) always follows actions that show the loving, healing, restoring, life-changing, liberating power of God – actions that Christians themselves step out with boldness to do in Jesus' name – actions that may unsettle patterns and habits and systems and assumptions that people are operating with.

So, let's talk again about Jesus. What is it he says, in what we heard this week in the Gospel of John? "I am the good shepherd." "I lay down my life for my sheep." (John 10:11-12)

I am the good shepherd – the GOOD shepherd. Not just "the shepherd." The **good** shepherd.

Because, there are bad shepherds. There are adequate, half-hearted shepherds.

The good shepherd is different from hired hands, different from not-so-good shepherds. What makes the difference is how well the good shepherd knows and loves his sheep, and just how far the good shepherd will go for the well-being of his sheep.

This image of good shepherding was so deeply rooted in Jewish thought, faith, and life – with the Jewish people of that time, we hear Jesus' words and see images of David with the flocks and writing a beloved psalm, we catch glimpses further past into the images and stories of Jacob and his children with their thousands of flocks, of Abraham and Sarah setting out on their long years of nomadic life with their herds, and even further back to Abel the herdsman who was killed by his brother in jealous rage. All of them, deeply connected with their flocks.

There is a demonstrable difference in outcomes when police live in the communities they patrol, and make it part of their calling to become known in those neighborhoods. When I lived before in Alexandria, Virginia, I became involved in seeking to build relationships between clergy and police in the city. I was also assisting in building efforts to secure more affordable housing for working people who served the city but could not live in the city due to rising housing costs. I went to the police chief's annual state of the city address. He shared with us an account of a neighborhood where the city had provided a house for an officer to live. Over the several years the officer and his family lived there, he got to know neighbors and community members well and became a trusted part of the community they knew had their safety and care as his key concern. Over the few years he was there, crime went down in that neighborhood by over 70%. In the follow-up time of questions for the chief, I noted how wonderful this story was, and I asked him roughly what percentage of Alexandria police officers lived in Alexandria. He paused, then answered, "Many of our officers choose to live where they can purchase a home for their families, and it is hard to find that here. I'd have to say about 85% live outside Alexandria, and a good percentage live over 30 miles away."

The hired hand does not have investment in the sheep, except inasmuch as they result in a daily wage, a paycheck. And, why would you? It becomes a job, and detachment gets rooted into the job. So, the sheep become more like objects.

But the good shepherd is with the sheep constantly, and comes to know them well. And the sheep know the shepherd.

Elsewhere in the Gospel of John, Jesus talks about the kind of intensity of the good shepherd's relationship with the sheep – where the shepherd becomes also the gate, the safeguard. This is part of what Jesus means when he says that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. To be one that looks after the safekeeping and health of the sheep, even at risk for oneself. But Jesus means even more than that when he says – and repeats – "I lay down my life for the sheep."

Jesus gives himself completely for the sheep that he loves and knows.

In the first letter of John, the writer reminds us that we are to follow Jesus and do as Jesus did. We are to lay down our lives for one another in love – and we are to lay down our lives for others around us (I. John 3:16). The writer goes on to make very clear that this kind of care for others is the real evidence that we are abiding with and truly connected with Jesus, the Good Shepherd. As the writer asks, "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?" (I. John 3:17). And so, we are really living that love when it is not words or pretty speeches only but it is by actions and by truth-telling (I. John 3:18).

How are we giving ourselves in this way, for people around us, for people far and near?

This coming week, we will remember and celebrate the life of a deacon of this church of St. Luke's, a man who embodied what it means to give yourself to God and to others out of deep love and care – and what it means to call others to follow and do likewise. Bob Runkle, our "Beacon Bob" as he was known, gave of himself with utter dedication, and loved others person by person by person. The stories I have heard of him have been remarkable. There was no one outside the range of his care – and of his vigorous, compelling invitation to care.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd whose flocks extend far and wide. The sheep are not just the sheep that we might think are all he cares about – the ones in this particular fold, this pasture, this farm. As 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. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16-17). This is Jesus’ incredibly big – universally big – heart. In the past century, there have been Christians who have taken this to point to how Jesus’ embrace and care extends to people across all religions. I tend to hold that as my hope and belief as well. But I think these days we need to take it more intently to point to how Jesus’ embrace and care extends across race, ethnicity, language, identity, and background of any kind. This is closer to what the original writer of John’s Gospel was pointing to – how the love of God through Jesus Christ was not just for one race or group that had long treasured its identity as God’s chosen people, but it was also every bit as much for all people who were considered outside and different.

Jesus gives himself completely for all of us – all the world – all people of all types and groups. “I lay down my life for the sheep.”

Make no mistake. George Floyd did not lay down his life. It was taken from him.

Make no mistake. Derek Chauvin did not lay down his life. No, not in any way. No.

And yet, Jesus loves each of them. Hard as that may be for us to hold. Jesus lay down his life for each of them – for George, and for Derek.

Friends in Christ, let us continue to pray for George whose soul with all the souls of the departed rests upon the merciful love of Christ. Let us pray for his family, friends, and all those many people who have been affected by his death. And let us pray for Derek whose path toward redemption continues to unfold for him. Let us pray for his family, his friends, his colleagues, and those who must think freshly about their lives and work because of his crime.

May Christ Jesus continue to open our hearts and minds to one another, and to people in the world around us. May we dare to abide in the One who lays down his life freely and willingly for those he loves – which is every one. How shall we follow Christ in this way? How shall we lay down our lives for others? Who will you come close to, let yourself become connected with, so they are no longer objects but are people with whom you are entwined and who matter to you?

This is how the love of the Good Shepherd is known – not in words, but in truth and action – costly action by which we really come to know the life-changing, world-changing power of the Christ who laid himself down for us all and who rose again.