

The Good Shepherd, John: 10:11-18

03/25/21

“I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for my sheep.”

Referring to the Good Shepherd in our gospel today, Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Bread of Angels*, says “there is something about ownership that creates intimacy.” Meaning that the hired hand does not own the sheep so when he sees the wolf he runs away - these are not His sheep so why would he risk his life to protect them? On the other hand the shepherd owns these, his sheep. He knows them and his sheep know the sound of his voice and comes when he calls them.

Now BBT is way smarter than I, but I want to suggest that it's not “ownership” that creates intimacy. Ownership might instill commitment, but not necessarily intimacy. No, because even ownership of something does not mean that I will lay down my life for it. As an example, if my car is on fire, or my house - I'm outta there! The things I would risk my life to save in those situations are the people and ideals with which I share my greatest intimacy - my husband, Richard, our dog, Lucy, our children and grandchildren and our friends, and you know what, I don't really “own” any of them. The only thing I own here is my lifetime commitment to these beloved relationships.

I would suggest that, rather than “ownership,” the things and people that we might lay down our lives for - day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute are those people and things, places and yes, even our ideals, where we have INVESTMENT of ourselves and our lives. Those people and things which we have INVESTED, sometimes years of our emotions, time, love, care, nurture and yes, even our money. These are the truest places of intimacy and where we might actually be willing to die. I believe God loves each of us *at least* as much as we love our dearest people.

Now Jesus isn't really talking about a random shepherd here laying down his life here for a bunch of sheep. This story about the Good Shepherd is a wonderful parable instructing us about Jesus, as our Shepherd, and his relationship with each of us. The story is about how much God in Christ loves us! Jesus is telling his disciples and us that we are his followers - we know his voice and he knows us and loves us. When we little sheep come to know his voice in our lives, we will follow him.

Now I'm going to quickly jump over to the words in the first letter of John this morning: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” and it goes on “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses help?” Scripture is one way we followers of Christ can hear his voice - and the most important reason to read our Bible's every day. It provides us with the practice of listening for God's voice. The Gospels tell us over and over again to Love each other, help each other, stand up for each other, *invest* in each other.

One way of investing in the people of our community and the whole world, is through our commitment of time, talent and energy to the worship, work and outreach of our church. Invest in ways to serve others right here at Calvary with the gifts you've been given for music, altar guild, lay reading, visiting the sick, volunteering at the Thrift Store, writing notes to those who are elderly in nursing homes and hospitals, participating in planning and implementing outreach events which serve the people of our community, and seizing numerous other opportunities as they come up. And yes, even giving of your *material wealth* to lighten the load of those who don't have enough food or shelter.

"So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again." These words from Jesus were to tell his disciples that he would be back. And when he rose again and returned to them, they were no longer sheep - he gave them shepherd's crooks of their own and sent them out to find their own flocks and instructed them and us to "do for others what I have done for you." We have so many blessings, don't we - so many things for which to be grateful, and God asks us to bless others.

The things which we lay down as sacrifice: things like un-forgiveness, blame, guilt, bitterness, fear, judgment - as we die to those things, day by day, we too, will be changed from sheep into shepherds. The things we choose to re-invest our lives in: healing, reconciliation, hospitality; generosity of spirit as well as our possessions; opening our hearts and minds to our neighbors, we invoke the kind of intimacy that we may never have dreamed could be ours and it's so much more fulfilling than ownership! This is how we lay down our lives for others - by offering our gifts to them moment by moment, day by day, year by year, and finally, lifetime by lifetime. And how shall we follow Him? As wide awake as we know how! We do the next best thing we see to do - one step at a time. It is simply what we do once we know whose we are. We die to our old selfish gains and arise to give to others the best we have to give and that's Christ and him crucified and resurrected - offering that saving and Amazing Grace that saves us all. It's the real gift Christians have to give to the world!
Amen

Deacon Geri