

“Love In Action”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Psalm 23

I John 3:16-24

John

Sometimes, the lectionary texts— that is, the assigned readings shared by Christian churches throughout the world on a given Sunday— require me to construct something like a long, thin, swinging bridge across two vastly separate banks of land in order for me to make a connection between them in my preaching. Sometimes, I do not even bother. But our readings today make it quite obvious, don't they? The love we know in God our Creator, and in Jesus Christ, *shepherds* us. When we trust in that love, we abide in Jesus, and Christ abides in us. That kind of love— the love that causes a shepherd to lay down their life for their sheep— inspires us to also lay down our lives for one another, to not just love in word and speech, but in truth and action.

When I was in college, I spent two years working as a camp counselor and lifeguard at Camp Calvin, the Greater Atlanta Presbytery's version of Camp Johnsonburg. I still remember my staff orientation from my first year there. The camp director asked us to imagine someone who had played a mentoring role in our lives. We were then asked to take some time and write on a piece of paper three characteristics that we admired in that mentor. I thought carefully to come up with the three things I admired most in the person I had picked. My camp director then told us, the group of counselors in training, that the three things we wrote down are actually strengths we have within ourselves. She said that because these characteristics resonated with us, we already carried some of that quality within us. It may not be cultivated yet, but we could work on that. She told us to remember those three characteristics and to let them be guiding values for our leadership over the summer.

I took her advice to heart, and I am convinced those wise words helped to make me a better counselor that summer and a better leader beyond that. Any good leadership qualities you see in me have probably been called forth by someone who *shepherded* me in a way that recognized my gifts and helped to make them stronger. If there is any way that I can in turn do that for someone else, I consider it an honor and a blessing.

Shepherding is an important theme in both the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. What comfort Psalm 23 has given people, including myself, in times of anxiety or uncertainty! It is the most requested scripture at funerals over which I have presided. It is also a lovely practice for children to memorize the Psalm, and every couple years or so our Sunday School teachers work with our middle grade children to help them memorize this Psalm as a spiritual practice they can have for the rest of their lives. To count on a God who will be our Shepherd, who will lead us beside still waters and to eat from the greenest pastures, is a deep comfort. To know this God shepherds us through the darkest valleys, and sets a table where we might peacefully share a meal with our enemies, teaches us to imagine holy possibilities beyond that which we fear most. If you have not memorized this Psalm as an adult, it is worth trying as a spiritual practice-- and, it's so short it makes it easy enough to learn even for those of us who have a clumsy memory.

Jesus builds on this notion of shepherding. He designates himself as the Good Shepherd in John's gospel-- who goes above and beyond the role of hired hand, willing if the wolf comes to lay down his life for the sheep. But like my summer camp director, Jesus was also using an image that would call forth something with his disciples. He was preparing them to be shepherds as well. As Jesus said to Simon Peter after the resurrection, "Do you love me? Then feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep."

So Jesus, who modeled shepherding so well first for us, now asks us to become shepherds. I have never experienced shepherding of sheep,

goats, or any other hooved creature. I have shepherded churches, and I have shepherded my own child, as well as pet dogs. Yesterday, when I let my daughter and her friend enjoy the carnival at the Overpeck Park for a bit on their own, I was surprised to see her come home with a plastic bag full of water, and a startled looking goldfish darting around the bag.

It turns out I had never given her lecture number 728– the one on not taking home carnival goldfish as prizes. And so she hadn't realized that PETA has succeeded in banning fish as carnival prizes in Iowa, Maryland, South Carolina, Vermont, Massachusetts– but *not* New Jersey. She did not know that most people who bring a fish home from a carnival are not prepared to give a fish properly balanced water, an aquarium that has enough space, and the effort to keep its environment clean. Most carnival prize fish die quickly at the hands of their unprepared keepers. Well, *our* family won't be like that. And so, I drew upon all my years of childhood fish keeping, and my daughter and her friend– this is a shared custody goldfish, apparently– did some research on their own. We all went to Petco and Kai and her friend set up the aquarium and even designed an adoption certificate for their fish. I hope my daughter will learn to be a good fishkeeper, and perhaps even learn a spiritual lesson in what it means to tend to another creature. Not only that; I hope, in watching her care for this fish, we will have conversations about the rivers and oceans, the rising temperatures of our waterways; the bleaching of coral; and how our use of plastics infect the waters and eventually, as microplastics, poison fish, seabirds, sea turtles, and marine mammals. I know in the long run, this will be an even bigger problem for her generation than it has been for mine, and that weighs heavily on my conscience.

As Earth Day approaches tomorrow, we should be especially mindful that one sin of our times is *the notion that we must always be wanting more*. However, the Psalmist boldly proclaims, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” Other translations say, “I lack nothing.” But the commercial nature of our society teaches us that we will *never* have enough. And so we collect and order and store *so much stuff*, gathering it as a buffer between ourselves and our fears, as if it will really give us the peace for

which we long. It doesn't. What the Psalmist knew is that the simplicity of a life where we rely on God's good care first and foremost delivers us goodness and mercy, more than any Amazon delivery ever could. I preach this word, because I know that I need to hear it myself!

That kind of trust in God's love and mercy gives its own sense of abundance, a sense that "my cup overflows." When our cup is filled like that, we are able to turn and be generous to others, as well.

I have been catching up on the affordable housing meeting that Leonia had last Monday night- I missed it because our Session met at the same time. From what I understand, Leonia is far behind in meeting its affordable housing obligation. We have been for many years, but a new law will tighten the consequences for not meeting these obligations, and when a municipality fails to meet them, it will allow developers to come in and build whatever they want, regardless of zoning regulations, as long as a proportion of their development includes affordable housing. This law has caused quite a stir in Leonia and municipalities in NJ, especially in places where there is not a lot of empty land to build. And it is becoming clear that coming into compliance will require sacrifice and could yield one or more of the following changes: higher taxes, a change in the look or feel of Leonia, finding space for more children in the schools, increased traffic.

Many of you know affordable housing is personally important to me. Having spent a portion of my childhood and youth struggling because my mom could not afford consistent housing for us, I feel grateful to be able to raise my child in Leonia and its good schools. It is like I can finally be at ease among green pastures and still waters. That gratitude makes me not want to clutch my privilege close to my heart, but instead to see that there are fair chances for other families to enjoy what we have.

I stirred up some conversation by sending a letter to the Leonia listserv, asking questions about our town's moral and legal obligation to provide affordable housing. I shared how in my experience as a pastor who works in our congregation and also with the many groups we support that feed the

hungry, shelter the unhoused, and welcome immigrants. In that work, I often have come across people in need of affordable housing. Some need vouchers or Section 8. The waiting lists or lottery to get this kind of assistance makes it incredibly hard to attain. And even after they are approved for assistance, they still have trouble finding available units. The resources of this church, and even of big agencies like Center for Food Action, can only go so far in what they can do to help people from becoming unhoused. I have known women in abusive situations who have chosen to stay with a partner because they cannot find housing on their own. And as you may know, 2 years ago in Leonia a woman was killed by her boyfriend in the apartment they shared. As a Leonia neighbor, this weighs heavily on my conscience.

I understand that Leonia is not equipped to absorb all the affordable housing units that the laws have required us to provide— at least, not without any of the sacrifices I mentioned earlier. But if we do not meet our moral and legal obligation, who should? Poorer neighborhoods with less resourced schools?

The 1 John epistle reminds us, "We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us--and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." The letter tells us to "love not in word or speech, but in truth and action." The writer instructs that all who follow Jesus' commandment to love one another abide in Jesus, and Jesus abides in them. In a sense, just as Jesus has shepherded us, we get to shepherd each other-- and in doing so, we have that piece of Jesus that abides, or lives, in us.

The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor once had a conversation with a ranch hand, who had worked with both sheep, and cattle. Here is what she learned: "Cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind them making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows, my friend said, but you lead sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first -- namely

their shepherd -- who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.”

Jesus has already walked ahead of us. He lived a life of teaching, and also sacrifice. He risked a lot and even lost his life. But he gained new life through it, as we see in the resurrection. Jesus still shepherds us, beyond our wants, beyond our fears, from death into life. That is love in action. May we trust in that love. May we drink deeply from it. And may we follow, boldly, because of it.