

April 21, 2024

Pastor Laurie Lynn Newman

John 10:11-18

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

This scene from the Gospel of John, about recognizing the true voice of the Good Shepherd has an even more complexity today, than it did a few years ago. Hearing a true voice is harder than it used to be. We now know that AI can mimic people's voices. When I met with the confirmation kids a couple of months ago, they showed me how AI images can fool us, too. If you look closely, and see that there is an extra arm, or too few fingers. In this complex age, how do we hear and recognize the true voice?

I love the synchronicity of the appointed scriptures and the life of the church! Last Thursday evening, the Council unanimously approved an outstanding candidate to be your next settled pastor. (You'll be hearing details about that, later in this service.) The next step for St. Andrew, will be for the congregation to meet candidate, and then a week later, to vote. For more than fifteen months, this vibrant community has been actively listening for, and discerning what is true, and good leadership for St. Andrew at this point in time, and going forward.

Now, you are on the verge of taking next steps into a future, grounded in God's grace, growing in Jesus' love and moving with the Holy Spirit! I believe that gets the heart of the readings today. Today's Gospel focuses on the "Good Shepherd."

In the phrase "good shepherd," the Greek word translated as "good" (*kalos*) doesn't mean "morally good" but rather "real and proper" or "true," "genuine." Jesus makes a distinction between the "hired hand" who doesn't genuinely care for the sheep, and the good shepherd, with whom there is belonging, trust and mutual love. Jesus is the model for the genuine, true shepherd. A key part of how it works, is that the sheep listen and trust the voice of the shepherd.

But hearing truth and trusting leadership isn't easy. In the past few years, with the barrage of social media, and the blurring of truth, opinion and untruth in the news, it seems that more and more complicated to hear the truth. Also, religious leaders and institutions have sometimes led in ways that are damaging to the most vulnerable. Especially, when we don't know that the future is going to be, trusting can be tough. I like what author Margaret Wheatley wrote:

*"It is possible to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another."* --Margaret Wheatley, When Change is Out of Control

Attend to the quality of relationships! That's what St. Andrew has been doing in many ways. Building relationships has been at the core of the transition/call process, beginning with the Horizon group conversations, nearly two years ago. Relationality is at the heart of the transition/ call team that met so faithfully for many months. At each meeting, the group focused on listening for God, and deepened in relationship with one another, sharing in one-on-one conversations around faith and experiences. But the rest of the congregation has also been

attending to the quality of relationships through the Connections (formerly known as MACG); through fellowship of the Nifty Knotters, through thoughtful educational ministry, the teamwork around Lutheran World Relief Ingathering, supper groups, book groups, Eucharistic ministry, the Roots program, and Youth ministry, the Caregivers support group. Friends, the best way to prepare for moving forward with new pastoral leadership, is to continue to attend to the quality of relationship with one another, and your new pastor. That all, is grounded, in God's love.

But, what about this part of the scripture about Jesus' laying down his life for the sheep? I must admit that it could be intimidating—even scary-- as a pastor, to face an expectation of laying down one's life, for the flock. Fortunately, the Synod, and congregations, have wisely learned important things about how to support and nourish the pastor-congregation relationship, so that pastors won't burn out and leave. Once again, the key here is in building relationship, and building trust, and remembering that we are one in purpose, to love and serve God, and to love one another. Friends, welcome your new pastor, as warmly as you welcomed me—and as you have welcomed new members to St. Andrew. . . The movement of God's loving spirit will continue to grow the love and trust within the congregation, and then—boy—just imagine where St. Andrew's ministry and mission will go!

In seeing Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we see that his death is just the first movement in a larger picture of Easter morning and beyond. "Laying down his life" was a traumatic step -- but then in resurrection, Christ "draws all people", including "the other sheep". The Holy Spirit moves it all, and the church is born to do "greater works than these" In John's Gospel, Jesus' death makes possible this surprising, grand reversal and ever-growing into "abundant life."

It's for the sake of this chain of events, and ultimately that abundant life, that Jesus, "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." "I know my own, and my own know me," says the good shepherd. John's Gospel reminds us that God's salvation extends beyond expected or conventional bounds: to "other sheep," to the "dispersed children of God," to "all peoples." The growing edge of the church, of every faith community—is in finding ways to love all peoples, and the planet. In the coming days, months and years, St. Andrew is poised to keep finding new ways for that abundant life to flourish.

Many of you have expressed concern and curiosity about what comes next for me, when I leave this interim pastorate at St. Andrew. My answer is that right now, my next steps are unfolding. . . I've interviewed with several churches, and a couple of possibilities are emerging. In my process, too, I'm listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd. And, I'm confident, that in a wonderful way, I'll carry you with me into my new life, just as you carry the mutual care we have shared, and the care you've had with other pastors.

Jesus says "I know my own and my own know me." This process of belonging, grounded in God's love, really is always, all of our work. One flock, one shepherd. The Holy Spirit is at work in helping us to recognize where we are invited to share ourselves and gifts in the service of Jesus' compassion and God's grace.

St. Andrew, friends here, and virtual friends--Blessing to you, and thanks be to God!

