

Our second Scripture is going to focus on the image found in the 23rd Psalm that we used this morning as our Call to Worship. The image of God and Jesus as shepherd. Shepherds were not looked upon very favorably by others during the time of Jesus.

Shepherds were seen as migrants who moved around from place to place with no real place to call home. I think of the words of Cher singing of Irish Travelers or gypsies being called tramps and thieves. Shepherds would be today's migrants or gypsies in the eyes of others and they were not to be trusted.

Recognizing the negative image that many folks had of shepherds, let us listen to these words from the gospel of John.

Read John 10:11-18

One of my pastoral roles is to lead funerals. Every time I lead a funeral I am reminded of the funeral I did for Andy after his death. Andy's funeral was the worst job I ever did in leading a funeral. After that funeral I was quickly told by Andy's parents how much I hurt them in what I said. I keep this memory of pastoral failure alive today because it drives me to never make the same mistake again.

Andy was not a member of the church in North Carolina where I was the pastor, but his common law wife and his parents were. In fact, it was on the back porch of his parent's home where I accepted the call to become the pastor of that church, the first church I served as a pastor.

I did not know Andy very well. To be honest, I did not think much of him. My dislike of him lay the groundwork for what followed after his death.

Upon hearing of Andy's death, I made assumptions about how he died. I assumed that he made personal choices that led to his death. And I was probably right.

But when I arrived at the home to be with the family I did not do what pastors are supposed to do upon arriving at the home of a grieving family. I did not initiate conversations with family and friends so that they could share with me helpful memories about the deceased. I simply existed in the home until I felt ready to leave.

I never took the time to get to know Andy in those moments. I never listened to what others had to say about him and why they were his friend and what was unique and special about him in the family. Never getting to know Andy through the memories of others proved to be a big mistake.

After leaving the home I then went to work on creating the funeral service including the sermon. Because I never asked, I assumed that Andy was a big disappointment to his parents. With this assumption, I decided to go with the story of Adam and Eve and how God dealt with the disappointment of God's children when they rejected God in the Garden of Eden.

I made an assumption about Andy and his parents because I did not know the relationship of Andy to his parents. I made a huge mistake with that assumption.

Andy's parents never spoke to me again after that funeral. They went from active Presbyterians to never setting foot in that church again. I share this story as an example of what happens when two people do not know each other. When we do not know the other person, we make assumptions which can have costly consequences.

Contrast this image with the image presented to us in the gospel of John today. In this passage Jesus is described as someone who intimately knows us. The one willing to lead us. The one willing to lay down his life for us.

I share this information based on my research on what shepherds are supposed to be like. But the problem is that we don't have any shepherds in this congregation.

Maybe if I was preaching on this text in Ireland then the image of the shepherd would make sense. But we don't know much about sheep around here. But we do know something about cats, and dogs, and birds, and gerbils, and ferrets, and other pets that we keep around the house.

And so, I got to thinking. What if we replaced the image of shepherd with an image that we can relate to? What if we described Jesus using the image of cat owner or dog owner or gerbil owner or whatever your pet of choice?

Maybe this commercial from a few years ago is an image that we can better relate to.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_MaJDK3VNE

So, what if rather than shepherd we re-read this passage from John using an animal image that we can better relate to so that it reads:

“I am the good dog or cat owner. The good owner lays down his or her life for the dog or cat. The worker at the shelter runs away when a red wolf or coyote comes around the neighborhood. But I am the good dog or cat owner. My animal knows me, and I know my animal. I have other animals too. I have horses. I have cows. I have chickens. They know me as well. Together we are part of one family.”

Does this image make a little more sense to us? Think about your relationship to your favorite animal. That dog or cat or gerbil or ferret or horse or cow or chicken or whatever animal you call your own. Think about your feelings toward that animal. That about how well you know that animal.

Think about how willing you are to do what is best for that animal. Think about what kind of care you have provided that animal when it was sick or hurt. Think about how sad you became when that animal disappeared and the grief you felt when you have had to put an animal down to death.

Now transfer that relationship onto our understanding of God and Jesus. Jesus is the one who knows us fully. Jesus is the one who lays down his life for us. Jesus is the one who makes the total sacrifice for each of us. We are fully known by God through Jesus.

Today we have been blessed to participate in the baptism of Reese and Andi Wrenn. Baptism reminds us that we are fully known by God through Jesus. As we placed water on the heads of these young girls we affirmed as a congregation that we know and love them and their family.

We affirmed to them that we will nurture and support them. As we did this as a congregation we also symbolized the bigger and deeper commitment that God has to them and to all of us. That God knows them deeper than any of us ever will.

I don't think I've ever seen any pictures painted of Jesus as the good dog or cat owner. But maybe someone here could paint or create that picture. Maybe this is an image which can connect to us and remind us that God knows us fully.

In the fullness of that knowledge we have the blessing of God's love in Jesus Christ. AMEN.

+++++

-Given: April 22, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)