

**Series: How Shall We Live**  
**Sermon: Abide in Him**  
**Scripture: 1 John 3:16-24**

**Good Shepherd Sunday**  
**April 21, 2024**  
**Rev. Karen H Roberts**

*16 We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 17 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? 18 Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. 19 And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him 20 whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; 22 and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 24 All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.*

The Shepherd is one of our favorite images of Jesus because it is one so easily understood. Jesus is the one who protects us, nurtures us, lovingly looks after us, and has our well-being in mind at all times. From our stained-glass windows to our hymnody...shepherd images are a vital expression of our understanding of who God is and who Jesus is...and who we are, the sheep of their pasture.

While the 1 John passage doesn't explicitly talk about Jesus as shepherd, we find in it the same themes as other "shepherd" texts...namely the call to lay down one's life for others in the way the shepherd puts their life on the line for the sheep, and the way the sheep obey the commands and guidance of the shepherd...they know the shepherd's voice and follow.

In this worship series, we have been asking, How Shall We Live as Easter people...as resurrection people - as people of the light...in a world that seems determined to keep us focused on death and living in darkness.

The difference in John's letter and the shepherd references in his Gospel, is that in his letter to the church John is explaining how we are to live in that dual role of one who abides in the shepherd and one who models the shepherd for others. We are sheep...but when it comes to our relationships with others, we are also shepherd-like in our willingness to lay down our lives for others...to see needs and meet them...to love as Christ, the good shepherd, loves.

Which opens the door for us to ask...what does it look like to be a bad shepherd? Ezekiel 34 provides the answer to that question. Ezekiel says a bad shepherd is one who wears the wool, drinks the milk, eats the meat but doesn't tend the flock, strengthen the weak,

heal the sick, bind the injured, bring back the strays, or seek the lost. In other words, a bad shepherd is one who takes the resources of the flock, but don't put anything into the flock. A bad shepherd is one who only cares what they will get out of it, giving no thought to what they are putting into it. A bad shepherd is one who uses, not one who loves. Did you notice that the being a bad shepherd sounds a lot like what Jesus warns us against in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus warns that our tendency is to think of ourselves but Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says we are judged on how we think of and treat others...it is in how we clothe the naked, heal the sick, feed the hungry, and liberate the imprisoned.

What John is suggesting is that the way we abide in Christ is to follow the voice of the Good shepherd and love the flock as he loves the flock: Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. That means we don't just say we love...we prove it by how we live. We don't just take Christ's loving nurture, we share it with others. We don't just eat and drink our fill of life, but we make sure others have a place in the green the pasture and beside the still water.

This week, our attention turns to Charlotte where The United Methodist Church will convene our 2024 General Conference. We will bring delegations from all over the world to one room, seeking to cast one vision, and remain one church, despite being from vastly different contexts. The theme for General Conference is Be Still and Know...the goal being that as controversy and conflict, which is inevitable in such gatherings, arise...we will be still and seek God...seek to know God and understand the path God would have us to follow. We will seek to be the flock...but we will also accept the call to be shepherd-like leaders for the people called United Methodists.

As I said a couple of weeks ago, we are striving to be one body serving one God and that will mean understanding there is a difference between unity and uniformity. We can celebrate being a diverse Church while also holding to the same essential truths. Two of the legislative proposals that will be talked about a lot in the coming weeks is the removal of certain language in our Book of Discipline and a revision to our Social Principles. Now, I want to remind you again – our core doctrine and our articles of religion – the essential truths that we state when we say the Apostle's Creed or Nicene Creed – will not and cannot be changed. The changes we are referring to are not in the essentials but in the varied understandings of how we live those essential truths in the world.

We are a church with room for conservatives and progressives and centrists. We are a church with room for African contexts, Asian contexts, European, Hispanic, and North American contexts. Yet, within our book of discipline is language that affirms the religious beliefs of some while denying the beliefs of others. The goal of revising our Social Principles, which are suggestions on how we are to live as United Methodists in the world, is to remove the language of "incompatibility" and create space for our diversity of faith expressions.

What we are seeking to do is to be more loving in how we shepherd the flock and that we are, like Christ, acting in ways that are filled with grace and mercy. We are striving to be a church in which we lay down our lives for others...and that doesn't always mean we are willing to die for someone, it can also mean we are willing to lay down our own preconceived notions and prejudices...that we are willing to lay down our hatred and anger, our jealousy and greed, our condemnation and instead refrain from judging others so that we might love them instead. Can we not trust Christ to be the judge and simply follow his call for us to love one another as we are loved?

Are we not grateful that Christ meets us where we are and loves us as we are and accepts us as a work in progress to becoming all we can be. We cannot be a church that denies that to others. We must be a church that meets others where they are, love others as they are, and accepts others as a work in progress to being all Christ invites them to become...something we cannot determine for them.

So, the discussions around these changes will be challenging. The challenges will be amplified by the fact that there are some determined to mislead and misinform. This week one annual conference had their website hacked and the information they had provided to help others understand General Conference resolutions was altered and lies were posted. My warning to you is to be careful where you get your news from in regards to what is happening. The various news outlets will be covering the conference but again, be wary, because they do not understand our structure, nor do they have the religious understanding needed to interpret what they are hearing.

In the coming days, if you hear something that worries you or upsets you, do research! Make sure you have heard the truth and not the lies. Call me! I'll be doing my best to keep up to date...I'll actually be there working on Wednesday...but call me and ask questions.

Today we are asking all United Methodist to participate in a prayer vigil – there are guides in the narthex if you want – but take some time to pray that we, as a World-wide Church, are abiding in the good shepherd and following the commands to love as Christ loves...to shepherd others as Christ shepherds us. We want mutual love to be our expressed truth...and that must be translated in action. Love can't be named...it must also be lived.

Let us pray:

King of love, good shepherd of our flock,

We admit that we don't always know how to live in light of your grace and mercy. We are prone to judgements on others. We are prone to arrogance when it comes to our beliefs and our way of living. This week, as our global church meets...help us to be still and know you – help us to still our own sense of judgment and trust you to be the judge. Help us to be still and know...not just you...but others...to listen and understand where we have inflicted pain by our language and to listen in and understand how we can find unity

in our diversity. Help us to be still and know the way forward that will strengthen your Church and nurture your flock. Help us to be still and know the ways that we can be loving and not just abusing our power and resources. Help us to know the difference between good shepherding and bad shepherding and give us the strength and endurance to wisely follow only the good. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen