

“Following the Voice of Love”

Psalm 23 & John 10:11-18
April 22 2018, Foothills Congregational UCC

“...And all that I want”

A little child in the Sunday school program of her church was given the assignment to memorize and recite Psalm 23 during the following week’s Sunday service.

She prepped and worked on her task every day leading up to the Sunday she was scheduled to share the beloved psalm in front of the whole church. She had it precisely memorized, but she was overwhelmed by stage fright the morning of her special task.

Sunday arrived. Nervously, she stood behind the pulpit aided by an added step stool to give her the needed clearance to see her smiling and receptive audience.

All started well enough, she began to speak Psalm 23 from memory: “*The Lord is my Shepherd...*”, at this point, her anxiousness got the best of her and at this point she felt like she was about to faint, she said again with her voice little faster and shakier, “*The Lord is my shepherd,*” and then she abruptly concluded, “*and all that I want!*”

While her recitation was incomplete and just off a bit from the original passage, nevertheless, it was excellent theology!

Shepherds and Charlatans

Throughout the scripture, the *imagery of shepherds* is used to describe both *political* and *spiritual* leadership.

Just as it was both before and after Jesus, good and *caring leadership is not a given*. **Kind** and **genuine** leadership these days seems to be in short supply.

Jesus also employed the imagery of shepherding to provocatively *call out the self serving leaders* so prevalent during the time of his ministry.

In the previous chapter of the Gospel of John, The bad leadership that Jesus was critiquing included **Pharisees** (In Ch. 9: the Pharisees critical of Jesus are spiritually without sight or perception).

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were in *collaboration* with *occupying* and foreign *Roman Empire forces*.

Many of the **oppressed** during the time of Jesus recognized that *much of what passed for leadership*, politically and spiritually, were *not voices to be trusted*.

We too live in a day and age where we are right to discern between voices of *good shepherds and self-serving charlatans*.

The Good shepherd

In our Gospel scripture for today, Jesus speaks to what a good shepherd (a good leader) is like, and then in turn, to the way we too (as the church and the living ministry of God here and now) should serve as good shepherd leaders in **our sphere of influences**:

- In your immediate family;
- In your extended family;
- In your community;
- At your school;
- There for your neighboring community;
- And especially there for the vulnerable and marginalized.

For its the care of the marginalized and vulnerable that typify the heart of a good shepherd. In ***Matthew 8:12*** Jesus tells of a good shepherd that goes off to gather back up **the one sheep out of hundred** that strays away and becomes lost—and the comparison is to God who delights in finding the lost and afraid sheep.

The word for “*good*” (*kalos*) can be rendered as a **noble example or model** for shepherding; and “**shepherding**” was a profession well *familiar to Jesus’s audience*. Actual good shepherds were known for their **positive bond** with their flock.

Well cared for sheep know a good shepherd's voice, and they *listen for that loving voice*, and they are *gathered in by that love*, because it can be trusted.

Affirmation and Stretching

We sense and know the voice of divine love because its affirming of our fundamental self—even with all of our *wounds, trauma* and *vulnerabilities*.

- *The voice of divine love* is *kind to our hurts*;
- It’s **affirming** of our *authentic self*;
- *It’s patient* with our *need for time to learn and grow*—in hope that we are willing to learn and grow.

It’s a voice that “*no matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here*.”

Even as hearing the **affirmation** of God’s love in my life has been meaningful and holy in my life journey, there have also been times when trying to emulate the example of a good leader like Jesus has **stretched** my courage and imagination and affirmation of others way different than me.

Following the voice of divine love has **stretched** my white-heterosexual-able bodied-male privilege to see and honor and to learn more about experiences outside of my own self.

Following the voice of divine love has **opened my heart** to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ Community— whom are members of my family, congregations and friendships.

Following the voice of divine love has **stretched** my fellowship to extend into ecumenical and interfaith communities.

Following the voice of divine stretches one's faith and sense of courage.

Courage is needed

We live in a day and age when courage is needed;

where we as people of faith and persons of good conscience, **follow the example of the good shepherd** in *how we care* for those **marginalized** and **even for the earth itself.**

In the past few years, *as fellow earthlings* we've lost to extinction exacerbated and accelerated by climate change (VOX via International Union for the Conservation of Nature):

- the white rhino,
- chained gecko,
- the blue-tailed skink, and
- the whiptail skink

We've also seen devastating **droughts, fires, floods, and hurricanes** *shaped and fueled* by global warming.

I struggle with how one can heed the voice of divine love and become more responsive amidst the days of scientifically observed human caused climate change.

Earth Day

Today is the 48th celebration of Earth Day going back 1970 origin.

Bill McKibben (climate change whistleblower and noted response organizer) expressed:

“[That climate change is not just a threat on the future horizon] *It's [now] our reality. We've changed the planet, changed it in large and fundamental ways... Our old familiar globe is suddenly melting, drying, acidifying, flooding, and burning in ways that no human has ever seen.*” (Bill McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, 2010, p. xiii and book jacket. Italics in original)

I was honored and challenged to hear Bill McKibben in person about five years ago in Fresno. He expressed that we are now entering into a time where awareness of climate change needs to

evolve into nonviolent direct resistance. McKibben commented how college age adults are inspiring such direct acts of resistance to climate degradation— but he also noted that it should be his generation (he's 57) and older that are risking arrest.

As it is, we are seeing our indigenous communities, such as Standing Rock and others, being good shepherds and caring leaders against pipelines and degradation to the environment.

May we too **raise our voice against selfish interests** that profit mightily off of a compromised climate, and continue to advocate for cleaner and safer energy policies and technologies.

May we too **listen for and hear the voice of the good shepherd** and **stretch in brave courageous and loving ways** to face the challenges of our day. Amen.