

## 1 John 3:16-24

<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup>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? <sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. <sup>19</sup>And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him

<sup>20</sup>whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

<sup>21</sup>Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; <sup>22</sup>and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

<sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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.

## John 10:11-18

<sup>11</sup>“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

To Bleat or Not to Bleat?

Of all the metaphors that Jesus uses, the shepherd / sheep metaphor is the most troubling for me. I understand that Jesus is the light who we look to, I understand that he is the vine and we grow out of him, I understand that good is the gracious father and we are the prodigal children, but I have a hard time thinking of myself as a sheep, because sheep really don’t do much besides bleating and eating and doing comes natural to us after eating. When we think of the totem poles of the great tribes of native Americans that usually depict an animal at the top of the totem pole from which the tribe has descended, it’s usually a soaring eagle or a strong wolf, not a timid lamb. We give our sports teams names like “Lions” or “Tigers” or “Bears,” not “the New York Sheep” or even “the Brooklyn Goats.” There’s no movie titled “The Lambs of Wall Street.” It’s just not a very flattering comparison.

At the heart of my discomfort, of our discomfort is the romantic notion that we are in control of our own destiny, that we are clever and strong and resourceful and self-sufficient, that we have the resources to be winners, dominant at work and home (or even church). We imagine ourselves more in terms of the noble beast who stakes out his territory and defends it from intruders – that’s evident all around us, from the locks on our car doors to the way we describe ourselves on

our resumes to the words we have with the umpire who calls a strike to the plots of most every action movie ever made where the hero destroys the villain in some dramatic fashion. We see ourselves much more as the predator than we do as the prey. We play by the rules most of the time – study hard, work hard, use discretion, and then we get what we want – house, car, cable television, two weeks vacation – that’s our territory, and we protect it, like a lion protects its den. Lambs have no den, and if they did, they couldn’t protect it anyway.

Now we have to remember that a metaphor is exactly that – a metaphor. It’s an imperfect comparison. We are not sheep in every sense of the word. Most of us are more intelligent than sheep, and part of what it means to be a Christian is to do your very best with the gifts God has given you (in other words, don’t use this sheep metaphor as an excuse to be stupid). However, Jesus clearly wants us to think of ourselves as sheep when it comes to 1) **listening** and 2) **following** him as the Good Shepherd.

What does Jesus want us to hear? Well, from the Gospel it seems quite clear that Jesus wants us to internalize the fact *that he gives his life for us*. Jesus emphasizes this – “The good shepherd lays down his own life for his sheep.” Four times he mentions it, and says that “I know my own and my own know me.” Of all the magnificent and cool things that Jesus did – healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, walking on water, speaking truth to those in power – what he wants us to embrace above all is that he giving his life for us. Why does he emphasize this? Because it is the supreme act of love. Next week is Mother’s Day, and guys, I don’t know how great your dad’s were, but I think most of us are mamma’s boys at heart. Why? Mom was usually the one who remained close to us while Dad went off to work most of the time. Dad might have been a great man, a mover and a shaker, a genius of sorts who knew so much about so many thing, and was able to water ski and climb Mount Everest and write books and build skyscrapers, but Mom was the one who showed you what love really is. Mom was the one who cleaned your “owee” and put a Band Aid on it. Mom was the one who cooked your favorite foods on your birthday. Mom was the one who rocked you back to sleep when you had a bad dream. That’s what Jesus wants us to know about God; he may be creator of the universe, but more important is the fact that he loves us. Jesus may have done a lot of cool things, but the coolest thing of all was that he laid down his life for us. That is love in action!

While the Gospel lesson tells us sheep what we need to hear, the Epistle lesson tells us how we are to follow; the good shepherd lays down his life for us – we are to lay down our lives for one another. It begins here in the church; we are to make sure that one another’s needs are met, that we have food and clothing and medicine – that’s love in action – and though it starts in the church it must be carried outside of the church into the world at large. I’m glad that Jesus reminds us in our Gospel lesson that he has other sheep in other folds. We don’t know who they are – they could speak a different language, go to a different church, or belong to a different culture or different religion altogether, but they’re still part of the fold, so even if we take John’s message to mean that we the sheep of Jesus’ fold are to lay down our lives for one another, it is not that clear to us who is part of the fold. Your job should not be trying to determine who’s in and who’s out. Your job is to know Jesus’ voice and follow him, and when you do that you will be able to figure out who’s in the fold and who’s not (and you may be surprise by who you see; “Wow, I didn’t know that *you* belonged to the fold.”)

I hope you see that following Jesus voice, based on what we just heard this morning, means *not* acting like lions or tigers or bears, not preying on weaker animals, not being territorial, not roaring and clawing, but loving, not in words or speech, as John points out, but in truth and action. It's so easy for many of us to dominate, to stake out our own kingdom and then defend it or expand it, to take the gifts and abilities that God has given you and use them to glorify ourselves. The Good Shepherd leads us into different pastures, where we care for one another and tend to one another's needs, even lay down our lives for one another. I pray that you would be content to follow Jesus into whatever pastures he leads you, and trust in him to protect you. He has already laid down his life for you so you could be free from sin, free from fear, free from a need to dominate. And he will lead you to green pastures always.