

Life After Easter: Devotion and Resurrection Love

John 10:1-10; Acts 2:42-47

A Sermon for DaySpring

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Two Sundays ago, I posed the question, suggested to me by my pastor-friend, Corky, “what can we say and know about our life after Easter, our life led in light of the reality of Christ’s resurrection?” And we have taken up that question in relation to doubt and resurrection faith and loss and resurrection hope. Today’s topic, the last in the min-series, is devotion and resurrection love.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer.

It is a truism among Bible scholars to say that Jesus used the language of everyday life to teach extraordinary things about the life to come; “earthly stories” with “heavenly meanings,” we say. Like most truisms there is a certain amount of truth to the claim. Jesus uses the relationship between a father and his son to talk about God’s extravagant love in The Prodigal Son. He uses the example of a widow whose only resource for justice is her own relentless persistence. Extraordinary teachings emerging from ordinary activities and occurrences—this was Jesus’ genius.

Over time, the ordinary can become obscured and what was once transparent becomes exceedingly opaque. Over time, certain terms become what biblical linguists call “dead metaphors” that no longer communicate. This is true whether because of Greek idiom or King James English, phrases like “straining at gnats” and “kicking at goads” no longer communicate as they once did.

Still, linguistic concepts are very resilient, rising again and again from their metaphorical ashes. There is the story, possibly apocryphal, of translators in England who were working on the *New English Bible*. When they came to the passage in the Prodigal Son parable that speaks about “the fatted calf,” they decided to find out its modern English equivalent. So they consulted a butcher in a London shop “as to what one called a calf that had been specially fattened up for a particular occasion.” “Oh,” the butcher said, “that’d be a ‘fatted calf.’ Comes from the bible, I think!” (Prickett, 68). And then there’s the whole shepherd/sheep business

The “Shepherd” in modernized, technological, societies is something of a “dead metaphor,” since few of us know any professional shepherds! Still, the image of the Good Shepherd has survived, even flourished, in western culture. In fact, the image of the Good Shepherd still has some kind of primal hold on us; it strikes a chord in us. How tender the kind shepherd must be with his vulnerable flock. How he nurtures and cares for them, protects them and guides them, guides us. And he picks us up when we are weak and tired, when we cry and when we grieve, and wraps us around his big shoulders, and carries us home.

So, today on what is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” in churches all over the world, ministers are talking about Christ as the Good Shepherd and perhaps also the vocation of ministers, who are shepherd/pastors called to care for the flock. Now, since we are at the moment without a pastor, let us leave it in the good hands of our Pastor Search committee and God to find us the right person and to trust that she or he will have

all the qualities of a servant/leader that we desire. We know what we want and it's a pretty short job description: we want a pastor/shepherd like Jesus! But if the Lord is our Shepherd, what does it mean to fall on the other side of the equation? What does it mean to be the Lord's sheep? I am not speaking from the position of Shepherd/Pastor, but rather I speak to you as a fellow sheep. So a few words among us sheep, while it's just us sheep.

I begin with a confession. While I am quite happy to refer to the Lord as my Shepherd, I've never been too crazy about being called one of the Lord's sheep. I had hoped to be the eagle of the Lord, or maybe the crouching tiger or hidden dragon. And all week long, I kept thinking back to the *Far Side* cartoon in which one lone sheep is seen standing erect on hind legs, visible above the surrounding flock. Its front legs are raised, and the sheep is proclaiming to the totally disinterested flock around it: "Wait! Wait! Listen to me... We don't **have** to be **just sheep!**"

Why do resist this identification? The image of "sheep" is a conflicted one, both in antiquity and in modernity. In the ancient world, sheep were rarely extolled for their virtues. People's behavior and appearance were often compared to that of animals; you know, brave as a lion, sly as a fox, harmless as a dove, that kind of thing. Sheep, in ancient thinking, almost always came out on the short end of the stick. Sheep along with deer and rabbits are "the most timid of all animals" (ps.-Arist. 806b). Sheep were gullible, certainly not the brightest of God's creatures. The ancient writer, Libanius, tells a fable in which wolves convince the sheep to sign a peace treaty with them and to dismiss the sheepdogs who had been guarding them. As soon as the dogs are gone, the sheep are gobbled up!

So in antiquity, sheep were not highly thought of. They seem to fair a bit better in the modern world, especially in children's literature. In the child's world, sheep are everywhere. With just a quick look through my children's books and toys from years gone by, I saw sheep all over the place – sleeping sheep, dancing sheep, rhyming sheep, fence-jumping sheep, sheep to be counted, soft furry sheep to be petted and cuddled. And the image is idyllic and warm and fuzzy!

But, of course, as with most childhood images, a little critical reflection suggests that things are not always as they seemed in Mother Goose rhymes. To call someone a sheep, today, is usually an insult. It suggests, for adults at least, someone who follows the crowd without question, who has no mind of one's own; to expect someone else to take care of us. To say someone is sheepish is to suggest that they are timid or meek or self-conscious about some fault as in a "sheepish grin." Still, I know that this image of sheep is an important one; there are over 500 references to them in the Bible; but what is a preacher sheep supposed to tell his fellow sheep? Earthly stories with a heavenly meaning?

What we are not intended to do is to allegorize this sheep business, as though every characteristic of Sheep behavior must find an analogy as a role model for Christian life. The image is partial and limited: best case scenario, sheep are protected until shorn; worse case scenario, from the sheep's perspective, the shepherd cares for them until they are "fatted sheep"!

Still, there are two points about sheep worthy of further thought, one negative, one positive. Sheep can, in their literary presentation, either be aimlessly scattered, or they can be purposefully gathered. Let's begin with the negative: the scattered, stray, lost

sheep. Left to their own devices, biblical sheep, more often than not, get into big trouble. One of the common images in the New Testament is of the “lost sheep” or the “scattered sheep” who, without a shepherd, tend to go “AWOOL” (!); sheep fall into ditches on the Sabbath, presumably while the Shepherd is at worship services; they are constantly in danger of being eaten by wolves.

But biblical sheep conjure up another, positive image for us, that of the purposefully “gathered sheep.” In John 10, the sheep follow the Shepherd wherever he leads because they recognize his voice. That doesn’t mean they follow in blind obedience; Jesus says they will not follow a stranger’s voice, because they do not recognize it (John 10:5). This is a kind of open-eyed, radical trust on the part of the sheep, who willingly submit themselves to be gathered. I rather imagine the sheep in Jesus’ riddle to be the kind of discerning sheep we meet in the movie, *Babe*, who respond to the protagonist pig, because Babe, unlike the sheepdogs in the movie, treat the sheep with respect and not like, well, “animals”! All well and good for sheep as sheep, but what does this sheep business mean for the church as God’s sheep, as a “gathered flock”?

The image of the “gathered church” is fundamental to churches, like Baptists, rooted in the Radical Reformation. If you ever look at an old seventeenth-century New England church, the sign will not say, “Founded in 1620,” “Founded in 1636,” “--but: it says “Gathered in 1620,” “Gathered in 1640,” and there is something very different between being founded and being gathered. The notion is that of sheep being gathered into the sheepfold” (Peter Gomes).

And what is the “gathered” church to do in order to avoid being randomly scattered, especially for a church like DaySpring during this period in which we are without a human shepherd? Here I think we are helped by the other New Testament lectionary text we read this morning from Acts 2. The summary in Acts suggests that the gathered church, the flock, engaged in certain practices to ensure its continued “gatheredness.” The early church devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship. These two go hand in hand. Devoted to the apostles’ teaching is an image that stretches in both directions. It reaches back into the teaching of Jesus, for the apostles’ teaching was held to be in continuity with the teaching of Jesus. And the apostles’ teaching reaches forward into time as it stands in continuity with what the early church called the “rule of faith,” which expressed the core convictions of Christian faith that are fundamental to Christian identity for all believers, in all places at all times. This rule of faith was later crystallized into consensual creeds, meant to serve, as fellow DaySpringer Dan Williams has said “like guideposts along a precipitous mountain pass ..”

Now, I know such talk of confessions and creeds is enough to make some Baptist knees knock in fear and trembling, because we have seen how such doctrinal statements can be abused and misused. But almost of all of the early Baptists of the seventeenth century wrote confessions of faith to show they were in line with the Great Tradition. And we were never meant to sign creeds, we were and are always meant to sing them or say them, as we do here during Baptisms at DaySpring.

The “gathered flock” of Acts was able to devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching because they were also devoted to *Koinonia*, which we usually translate “fellowship.” But *Koinonia* does not refer simply to the kind of fellowship that one has when the congregation has a “fellowship” after church, in which we eat cookies and drink punch! No *koinonia* has a lot more muscle than that. Devotion to fellowship is an

unswerving devotion to each other, sheep to sheep, even when we disagree with each other, profoundly and fundamentally, over the theological, or political, or social implications of the Great Doctrines of our faith; this unity in diversity has been a mainstay of DaySpring since it was first “gathered,” and we must never lose it. We can submit ourselves to the teaching of the church, because we submit ourselves to each other. Koinonia goes way beyond some insipid notion of tolerance. We tolerate a bad smell in the kitchen til it’s cleaned away. Koinonia is a devotion to each other so deep that we, in Resurrection Love in the Life After Easter, commit ourselves to each other and to the next generation of sheep: “to stand” as we will say in a moment, “beside new parents, walk with them, and encourage them as brothers and sisters in Christ”; to welcome these new “little lambs” into our midst, into our fold, and “to embody the love of Christ to them and teach them the ways of Christ.” We will fail each other, but we must not give up on each other. That koinonia also is expressed through our worship together, in what Luke refers to as the breaking of bread, that is the Eucharist, and prayer, both individual and corporate. (Read Burt’s sermons on that in the DaySpring archives.)

Finally, the believers were “together in one place and held everything in common.” They shared their possession so that no one was left in need. What a beautiful image of the gathered flock caring for each other’s needs, spiritual and material. Another reason the flock is able devote itself to the Apostles’ teaching is because the sheep share with each other! That sharing will lead to a different kind of scattering, not one rooted in selfish aimlessness, but an intentional scattering to touch those in need, sometimes as far away as Romania or India, sometimes as close as the retirement center next door!

From one sheep to another, listen! We may seem, at the moment, to be sheep without a shepherd, but there is no reason to panic and certainly no reason to stray. We have each other, gathered flock that we are, and we have a shepherd. Now in the world’s eyes, perhaps the only thing more foolish than the idea a pig shepherding sheep is the idea that a Lamb can do the job! But God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and in God’s foolishness, that is exactly what we confess: The Lamb/Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. How can we sheep do anything other than bow at the throne and join the other worshiping sheep, and raise our voices in devotion with them in this hymn of praise: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!” “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!” “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!”

My friend, Corky, was right. We do live out our Christian life in light of the reality of Christ’s resurrection. And this is life after Easter: there is Resurrection Faith in the shadow of doubt. There is Resurrection Hope in the face of catastrophic loss. And there is Resurrection Love to shape and embolden our “Sheepish” Devotion. Faith, Hope and Love—these three abide, and the greatest of these is *still* Love! Amen and Amen.