

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Shepherds and Sheep”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Easter 4—April 22, 2018

Lessons: 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

This fourth Sunday of Easter always focuses on the imagery of God as a shepherd. Every year on this Sunday the lectionary includes the twenty-third Psalm, the only psalm I can begin and always someone knows how to continue: The Lord is my shepherd.... Every year the gospel lesson on this fourth Sunday of Easter focuses on themes of God in relation to sheep: My sheep hear my voice. I am the gate for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. Today might well be called our Shepherd Sunday.

There are problems with this imagery. I knew one Presbyterian elder who hated comparisons suggesting that we are like sheep. He would say that sheep are simply stupid and although people might do foolish things, we are not that stupid. However poorly we may use them, we've still got brains. He did not like to be compared to sheep. He did not much care for these shepherd and sheep passages. But even if you think we are like sheep, most of us don't actually see sheep on a regular basis. To the best of my knowledge none of you are raising sheep right now. None of us see sheep or care for sheep on a regular basis. I don't think any of us are shepherds or even know shepherds right now. So what is it about this image that grabs us so strongly? Lutheran Bishop Robert Rimbo writes: “So how does this image make sense for us today, for people who see sheep only on Christmas cards and have never known a shepherd? Today we are reminded that the shepherd beyond all shepherds is Jesus. What is the main characteristic of this Good Shepherd?”

“Care. Thank God for that. God could have left us to ourselves. Instead God took on our flesh, grew in it, faced temptation in it, and died in it—in the most unique act of love in human history.

“This shepherd cares for all the flock, for you and me, for each unique and unrepeatable individual called to live in this shepherd's flock forever. This shepherd calls us by name, knows us more intimately than we know ourselves, knows that it's tough being a creature of flesh and blood and spirit and intelligence and freedom. And no matter how far we stray, this shepherd will track us down, cradle us and gently bring us home.”<sup>1</sup> The Shepherd has other sheep from other folds so we should give others the benefit of the doubt. They might also be sheep of our Shepherd. Is it any wonder that people, even city people, continue to hold fast to this image of God our Good Shepherd? The Good Shepherd looks after the sheep.

But that is not the total message for us today. We also have a real word of challenge. Scripture tends to be that way: loving, supporting and also challenging! Our epistle or letter of John, which was written as a commentary on the gospel of John, asks us rather pointedly: *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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.* It is all well and good to celebrate the God who cares for us, and leads us to green pastures and still waters and restores our soul. God does all those things and that same Good Shepherd calls us to put that love into action in our care of those who surround us.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Rimbo, *A Shepherd Who Cares*, Blogging Towards Sunday © The Christian Century, April 15, 2013.

Isaac Villegas quotes from Sebastian Moore who summarizes this passage as “No love of neighbor, no love of God” and then writes: “To neglect our neighbors is to live without God. To refuse to love is to cut ourselves off from the flow of God’s love through us.” He continues by writing—and he wrote this in 2015—about the raids and arrests and deportation of immigrants in our country, resulting in families being torn apart and says that “these deportations are examples of how not to love neighbors, and therefore how not to love God. No love of neighbor, no love of God.”<sup>2</sup>

I don’t pretend to be an expert on immigration, many people know more than I do. But today I offer another story that strikes me as being more representative of the Good Shepherd, who calls us to love not simply in word or speech but in truth and action. It is a story told by Gordon Atkinson about a friend of his named Roger who *has a ranch about 40 miles north of the border with Mexico and 25 miles from the nearest town. There are no paved roads leading to his property. He is there about twice a month on weekends.*

*“Roger showed me the simple house that was on the ranch when he bought it. It is made of wood and has a kitchen, some bunks and a bathroom. I asked him if he had ever seen any illegal aliens.*

*“Now and again,” he said. “But not very often. They don’t want to be seen. But sometimes you can tell they’ve passed this way.”*

*When Roger goes home at the end of the weekend, he leaves the door to his ranch house unlocked and puts cans of food out on the counter. There is a sign on the door written in Spanish. It says, “Please turn off the water and close the door when you leave. Thank you.”*

*Many people report destruction of property by illegal aliens, but in the eight years that Roger has owned his ranch he has not had a single incident of vandalism or theft. When he comes back to his ranch the door is always closed, the water is never running and the food is always gone.*

*I’m pretty sure that Roger’s ranch is marked on some of the maps that illegal immigrants carry north with them. It is likely marked with a big star and an arrow pointing to it. This is a safe place. Water and food and a friendly rancher.*

*How many desperate people have passed through Roger’s ranch? How many of God’s children have received a cup of cold water and an ounce of hope there? They are hungry. Their tortillas are moldy, their water gone. They stumble upon Roger’s house, read the sign, and go inside to find not only water but also food and a restroom. Imagine the stories that are told in shacks and adobe homes of the sign on his door and the miracle of food found in the nick of time. Can you hear their prayers of thanks for the blessed saint whose name they do not know?*

*We’ll never know how many have visited Roger’s ranch. But I believe the best acts of goodness and grace are of this kind—unknown except by those who receive them. Unseen by anyone else, and never celebrated by anyone else except in the kingdom of heaven where God sees all and counts even the hairs on your head.<sup>3</sup>*

Those who obey God’s commandments abide in God and God abides in them. The Good Shepherd who abides with us all, is forever calling us to care for the sheep.

Let us pray: God our Good Shepherd abide with us and strengthen us to abide with all your people, those you have given us to love and to be loved by. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaac S. Villegas, Two Loves, Blogging Towards Sunday, © The Christian Century April 20, 2015. See also: Dom Sebastian Moore, God Is a New Language, The Newman Press © 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Atkinson, A Thousand Little Maps, Kindness on the Border, © The Christian Century, April 4, 2006