

1 John 3:16-24 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

¹⁹This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: ²⁰If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²²and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. ²³And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. ²⁴The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

John 10:11-18 New International Version (NIV)

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father —and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life — only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

“Push Me Pull You, Lead Me Guide You”
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee
April 25, 2021

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Wendell Berry is one of our time’s best and most valuable writers, to whose poems in particular I often look for wisdom as well as beauty. If he made music, I think he would be called a “crossover” musician, because his deep Christian sensibilities permeate nearly every line. Still, his appeal is far wider than that, not only because of the beauty of his language, but also because he writes with such clarity and reverence about our relationship to the natural world and our responsibility to it. Likewise, he writes about our responsibility to one another in a way that compels me, at least, to want to act. According to the National Endowment of the Humanities, Berry’s having delivered the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, sponsored by the NEH is “the most prestigious honor the federal government bestows for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities.” Isn’t it encouraging that we are honoring at a national level such a heralded Christian writer?

Twice this week, in an online magazine and then a daily meditation, I was lured into reading Wendell Berry, and I am pleased for us that he helps to make sense of today’s scripture lessons.

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives might be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free. (*Wendell Berry, 1934 -*)

“For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.” Where do we find our rest? In what grace and comfort? For me, this morning’s lessons have everything

to do with comfort, and also everything to do with challenging us to move beyond our individual comforts. The imagery surrounding Jesus calls us to both perspectives. You see, Christ is both lamb and shepherd, and that's not as paradoxical as it would seem, as we seek to emulate him in our Christian discipleship. As is true in nearly everything I have come to know and to believe about our Christian faith, these aspects have to do with our relationships with each other, and with God, with Jesus.

David Lose, a Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis, reflects on today's scripture in a way that jibed with the sense of gift and giving that is so much a part of the Gospel. Lose suggests that we not forget the single line that precedes this morning's lectionary reading. Verse 10 is so familiar to us: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." There is no mistake in the Gospel writer's moving from this good news to what follows. Our abundant life rests on our shepherd's willingness to become our lamb. Our relationship to God changes because of God's willingness to enter into this depth of giving; into this abundance of loving.

You see, when I think about what a shepherd does for his sheep, it isn't just about keeping them safe from the wolf. It is about knowing and loving them well. That's what we read in this morning's lesson. I'm sure each of us could easily name the figurative wolves that nip at our comfort, snarl at our security, and bite into our satisfaction and ease. For some of us it's unemployment; for some of us it's a relationship on the rocks; for others it may be the grief of a loved one's death. Still, I'd like to spend time this morning thinking about those aspects of the shepherd's caring for and knowing the sheep that help us understand just how deeply we are loved; how deeply God loves us and desires for us to be in such a relationship that we can look beyond the current wolves to the abundance we are promised. We have a shepherd, Jesus, who has laid down his life for us, *and then taken it up again*, as the Gospel reads. It is no accident that Jesus writes about his death and resurrection in the context of sharing about a shepherd's commitment. The leaders we are willing to follow, and whose lives we are willing to emulate are those whose own practices of loving we have felt. We all want to be known and

loved just as we are. Jesus does this for us. Whether a black sheep or a mottled one, whether we reveal our love in return, or keep it close, Jesus loves us. Isn't that why we choose to follow him?

Think for a minute about the people we are willing to follow in this life of ours: Teachers who lead by example and who clearly love their “kids.” Coaches who want what's best for their players. I think of my friend and colleague from Blair Academy, who has coached basketball there for twenty years. Several of “his players” have gone on to the NBA, which I know not only from hearing about it, but because of those of their showing up for the dedication of a new court in Joe's name. Because he loved his boys, they love him back and show up for him. Seeing all the many players greet one another also tells me that they learned to love each other, despite being from different states and different countries. Parents are surely another group whose love is apparent, and whose kids are obedient—not that these two things always go hand in hand. We also vote for the politicians we believe will take best care of us. Pastors whose love is evident for their congregations . . . Whom are we willing to follow? We follow those we know love us back.

We are willing to follow into abundance—not into scarcity. And how will we lead into life, as disciples? If it's not just about survival, but about abundance, we really do need to love first and ask questions later.

So, what does it mean to be one of Jesus' sheep? If we follow Jesus into a life of abundance, we also should be moved to emulate him. That's what discipleship is, after all. While it may seem too difficult a calling when we consider the depth of Jesus' giving to us, we can look to John's first letter to know how to begin. This is where discipleship takes the form I have titled in an unusual way for this morning's sermon. Sometimes, when it feels as though the vulnerability required to be loved is too much, we need someone to push us toward opening up. Sometimes, when we see another's need, we need to be on the end of discipleship that means pulling another into the abundance we recognize. Sometimes we are the sheep who follow closely on our shepherd's heels, leaning on Jesus' grace and

mercy, and sometimes we are the ones called on to lead others to Jesus' grace and mercy. John's letter tells us how it's done. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." Actions and truth. Can we see what this abundance looks like?

I can in this Easter season. I know God's abundant love for us, because Jesus gave his life for us, and God has raised him up. We can give a little for others, trusting that God will also raise us up. This changes the way that we move forward, and the kind of comfort and peace in which we can rest. When we believe in the resurrection, and we trust in God's love, we find a different peace, a new abundance. Rather than looking and moving forward with fear and concern, imagining future losses, we can look forward with the hope of God's grace. I understand what Wendell Berry means when he writes about "the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief." Animals in nature are not bothered with worry about future losses or scarcity. They live in the now of present contentment, and bid goodbye and leave behind present losses. There is some kind of innate trust that things work out. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we can have a similar trust. In the face of the worst of calamities—in the face of senseless crucifixion, God presents us with the promise of a new and resurrected life of abundance. Out of death, we can look forward to life. I want to conclude by thinking about another poem of Wendell Berry, loving the last line of one of his most wonderful "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." There is every reason to read the copy I had Amy attach to yesterday's emailing for worship, but for now, in this season of Easter, I want to repeat his conclusion, which states as an imperative, "Practice resurrection." Being a lamb and being a shepherd require that we believe in resurrection. There is always the possibility of new life in a flock, even when one lamb dies. There is always the possibility that the shepherd will step up to protect and to support, and there is the knowledge that in this life of ours and in the next, Jesus will lead us to safety. We must live our lives in such a

way that we protect and that we follow, and that we trust our own shepherd who led us to victory.

Let us pray: Oh, loving and gracious God, give us strength and courage to be all that you need us to be so that we may live into the abundant life you have planned for us, choosing joy and love. Amen.