

John 10:11-18

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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.”

“We Know Love”

You can sense True Love and its effect upon us as Christians writes the poet Kathleen Norris.

True Love...
makes us fight
and bleed, takes us to the heights,
the deeps, where we don't
want to go. ...
You can tell.
The way light surges
out of nothing. The Magdelene,
the gardener. God help us,
we are God's chosen now.¹

The poet states that knowing ourselves as God's beloved, chosen in Christ, helps us bear life's hard times. While knowing true love as seen in Jesus' resurrection lifts us up, it also leads us to risk going where we don't want to. She claims in a few short verses that we know love through the actions of the One who loved us first. Yet it is a struggle for many of us to claim God's love. There are many voices screaming for our attention, judging our self worth these days. It is sometimes hard to know which voice is the One we should listen to.

There is a story I heard once about two artists who were commissioned to paint a picture of their conception of peace and love. The one who best captured the theme on canvas would be given a prize. Each artist went to their studios and painted for the allotted period of time, and then the moment came for the judges to look at their renderings. They pulled the veil off the first canvas, and there was a marvelous canvas. It was a Grandma Moses, peaceable kingdom sort of scene. A farmer's wife was preparing the evening meal. The farmer was bringing the cattle in at the end of a day from the pasture. The children were playing on the porch, and smoke was coming out of the chimney. The colors were beautiful. It made you want to be there. They thought that this painting was the one but thought they'd better look at the other.

So they pulled the veil off the second rendering and instead of beautiful colors and a peaceful scene, there was a raging waterfall. When you looked at it, you felt terribly upset. It got down into your soul and disturbed you. But at the side of the waterfall was a little tree. That tree grew in the mist coming from the waterfall, and on the end of the branch jutting out over the water was a bird's nest, and standing on the

edge of the bird's nest was a mother bird singing her heart out. The judges knew they had their winner. The gift of finding peace and love in the raging waters of here and now far surpassed their anticipation of a harmony that seemed so far removed from every day life.

The good news of God in Jesus is full of the same mystery the mother bird held onto. In the face of chaos, knowing God's love can lead us to sing a song of love and peace. Today's scriptures state that we know love, by the death of a man who laid down his life "for his sheep" even though he had the authority to take his life back at any point. The author of 1 John told early Christians, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us...let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action...and this is [God's] commandment, that we should believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." (1 John. 3:16,18)

The Gospel of John elaborates on the work of Jesus through recording his "I am" statements. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." These words of intimate love are meant to be known in our innermost being. Jesus' actions show us that his voice is the one to be trusted in the chaos of being sheep.

I had a friend who was very good at nurturing and expressing love to others but had trouble claiming God's love for herself. Because she did not know herself as loved by God, she constantly self sacrificed and laid her life and needs aside for another, her husband. One day I listened in stunned amazement as she told me that she was sure her friends only put up with her because they really loved her artistic husband. She believed that love came for her only through her attachment to him. I said, "I'm not in your life because of your spouse, but because of you—I barely know him. God doesn't love you for or through your husband. God loves you for you." Declaring God's love for her and stating my own was more than she could bear.

Though tears that streamed down her face she confessed that her marriage offered no loving support or intimacy. It had been that way since a few weeks after their wedding ten years before. All her pain, shame, self-doubt, fear, anger, and uncertainty tumbled out of her mouth and down her face in tears. That day my friend was resurrected to begin a new life just as surely as her savior had been. It was as if she finally heard God's voice calling out to her as a beloved sheep. She had been living with the flock, a participating member of her church, but emotionally was isolated from all that the flock believed. That we would realize God's love and claim it or ourselves!

Some of us know God's love best from experiencing the love of a parent, friend or spouse during our lives. Others of us come to know God's love as it bursts into our lives and reorders the way we see ourselves through the Spirit of truth. No matter how we first know love, the good news calls us to claim the love of the shepherd so that we may glorify God through love that leads to right relationships with God and one another.

Jesus' love for the world determines who we are and how we live. Our identity is found in listening to his voice as a sheep would listen in ancient days to the voice of their shepherd. This means all the other voices competing for our attention fade away.

The voice of the spouse that told my friend she was nothing without him, the voice of her family that told her she was damned for leaving the church she was brought up in, and her inner voice that told her she didn't deserve intimacy and love from her own husband...all these voices began to lose their power. She clung to the voice of the one that says "I know my own and my own know me. Abide in my love." Anne Lamott

writes “Hope is...about choosing to believe this one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak [stuff] anyone can throw at us.”² When we know God’s love is larger than anything else in our lives, we can claim the harsh truths about our lives in sure belief that God loves us and calls out to each one of us as one of God’s own. Claim the one thing that is bigger than anything else in our lives, God’s love. Amen.

¹ Kathleen Norris from *Journey* by Kathleen Norris, 2001, University of Pittsburgh Press.

² John M. Buchanan ed. *The Christian Century*, in “Sunrise.” April 4, 2006.