

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander
“The Reckless Shepherd”
John 10:11-18 and 1 John 3:16-24
4th Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2018

In both the gospels of Matthew and Luke we read about how Jesus once told a parable about a shepherd who had lost a sheep. It was one sheep from a flock of 100 sheep. 99 sheep were safely kept on a hillside but one was missing. In that story, the shepherd leaves the 99 and goes in search of the one who is lost. Some have called this the parable of the Lost Sheep. Others have called it the Parable of The Reckless Shepherd – the one who leaves the 99 to search for the one. This sign of God’s extravagant and selfless love shows how God gives up everything to recover that which has gone missing. The parable points to the great celebration of one who is recovered and brought home to safety.

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd – the one who lays his life down for his sheep – for the entire flock. The shepherd puts his own life at risk to save the sheep from all sorts of danger. This is in comparison to the hired hand who is not willing to risk anything because he is only in it for the paycheck – he doesn’t really care about the sheep – just his own gain.

Many of our ideas about this shepherd come from the 23rd Psalm. When thinking of that Psalm I have often focused primarily on the images of the Lord’s protection through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and of the promise that I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. But there are other beautiful images of green pastures, still waters, restoration and renewal. All that the sheep need are provided by the Shepherd – not just protection. And there is nothing reckless at all about that!

In the well-known book by Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, there is a description of the four requirements that sheep have in order to rest peacefully – freedom from fear, freedom from conflict with other sheep, freedom from other aggravations like flies and other pests, and freedom from hunger. When these basic needs are met in the flock, the shepherd has done his or her job and the sheep are able to lie down and rest.¹

Who can’t relate to that? When nothing is causing me fear and anxiety, when I am fed, when I am getting along with everyone, and when the mosquitos aren’t buzzing around my head, I can lie down and rest too!

The last two weeks we have talked about Peace – Shalom – as a gift from God – offered in Jesus Christ – and given through the Spirit of God. That is the kind of picture that I see here. Shalom – wholeness – peace – is given by The Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sake of the sheep.

In the reading from 1 John we learn that this same quality of sacrificial love is to be practiced within the faith community. We are called to lay down our own lives for one another. I think of it this way: because we are created in the image of God and because we are called to love one another as Christ has loved us then it stands to reason that we also have at least some of those shepherding qualities in each of us – taking care of one another – providing for one another’s needs – chasing away dangers – helping to provide those things which are basic necessities. Seeking the welfare of others first and our own comfort last.

You and I are called to care for one another and to care for the poor with the same kind of compassion and kindness and love that Jesus has shown to us. And so often we do. We give and we sacrifice and we step out of our comfort zones in order to make life a little better for others. So thank you for doing that!

When I was deciding on a sermon title for today I wanted to say that the text invites us to a kind of reckless love that doesn’t think of self – that doesn’t consider our own loss or discomfort or risk but rather throws caution

to the wind for the sake of the other – the poor – the marginalized – the oppressed. In preparation for today I have decided that I don't like my sermon title! God's love – while extravagant and risky is not thoughtless or careless. It is full of care and concern for the whole creation including you and me.

A Reckless Shepherd would be one who poisons the water hole and kills the grass and leaves the rod and staff behind to go and do whatever the heck he or she wanted to do rather than tend to the sheep. A Reckless Shepherd couldn't care less about the sheep or about those things which the sheep need in order to know peace, shalom, wholeness, and rest. Maybe the sermon title should be a question – “Are We Reckless Shepherds?”

Today is Earth Day and it seemed appropriate to me and to members of our Green Group (that small group of church members committed to our environmental stewardship as a congregation) to spend some time focusing on Earth Care. After all, we believe that the pages of scripture are filled with the call to care for, protect, and nurture the creation entrusted to us – including the sheep and the people who inhabit the planet. For it is the very stuff of our lives...the earth from which we were formed, the water we drink and that makes up about 60% of the adult body, the food that fuels the body and mind and gives us energy to love and to serve, and the oxygen that we breath – that fills our lungs and our bloodstream and reminds us of the very Spirit of God breathed into humanity at creation.

This creation is a gift to us and we are called to care for it - but on the whole we have not done a great job. Especially in the last few generations. I am not judging any one of us as an individual but I am pointing to the data that shows that humans overall have put dollars before common sense. In our own greed we have raped the earth of its resources, taken what we want and dumped the waste – some of it toxic - in someone else's back yard. We are slowly destroying our own home and it is up to us to turn things around. Global temperatures are up. Ice caps are melting. Seas and oceans are being overfished. The rate and intensity of storms and other natural disasters is increasing. Waste is being created at an unbelievable rate and being disposed of improperly. Air quality is decreasing – especially in urban areas where populations are growing most quickly. Forests are disappearing. Biodiversity is on a steady decline. I know it is hard to see after a beautiful weekend like we've had here in the Lake Norman area but our home is falling apart!!

Some people think it isn't even possible to change what is happening!! So why should we bother to do anything about it? I mean – hey – I'm going to dwell in the house of the Lord forever – why should I care about this one? **Here is why. Because it is a command from God and a specific and concrete way that we can be faithful – showing love for God and love for neighbor.** “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it.” Reads Psalm 24:1. All of our resources are given to us in trust with the agreement that we will wisely manage and care for them so that all might benefit from them and that future generations will find this earth in the best shape possible.

Some of you are familiar with an edition of the Bible that was published in 2008 known as *The Green Bible*. This Bible prints in green ink those references (over a thousand of them) which demonstrate most effectively how God and Jesus interact, care for, and are intimately involved with all of creation; how all of the elements of creation – land, water, air, plants, animals, and humans – are interdependent; how nature responds to God; and how we are called to care for creation.

In the Forward to *The Green Bible*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu reflects on what he calls the law of interdependence that God has set up in creation. He writes, “all kinds of things go horribly wrong when we flout this law – when we don't ensure that God's children everywhere have a supply of clean water, a safe environment, a decent home, a full stomach. We could do that if we remembered that we are created to be members of one family, a human family, God's family. We must act now and wake up to our moral obligations. The poor and vulnerable are members of God's family and are the most severely affected by droughts, high temperatures, the flooding of coastal cities, and more severe and unpredictable weather events resulting from climate change. We, who should have been responsible stewards preserving our vulnerable, fragile planet home, have been wantonly

wasteful through our reckless consumerism, devouring irreplaceable natural resources. We need to be accountable to God's family."ⁱⁱ

This is creation care – this is neighbor love!

So what does this look like? Well – rather than being reckless – it looks like being full of thought and care. It looks like making decisions while looking at the big picture. It means getting outside of our own lives and considering what is best for the world. Environmental groups like The Nature Conservancy or Green Peace or the World Wide Fund for Nature all agree that our daily practices make an impact. Maybe you could find one or two new things that you could do to be more thoughtful about your consumption of energy, water, or other resources, about your disposal of waste, about your carbon footprint, about your advocacy for those who are poor who don't have options about where to live or where to shop or about the resources that are at their disposal. On the bulletin board by the main office there is a list of ten things to do.

- 1) **Go Public With Transit, Walk, or Ride a Bike (Reduce your Carbon Footprint)**
- 2) **Reduce water usage with shorter showers, less flushing, etc**
- 3) **Plant a tree**
- 4) **Compost Your Waste**
- 5) **Telecommute when possible**
- 6) **Fix, repair, mend and reuse before you dispose and buy new**
- 7) **Stop to pick up trash on the side of the road**
- 8) **Buy Local**
- 9) **Use reusable coffee cups, water bottles, and grocery bags**
- 10) **Take a Sabbath from consumption.**

This is creation care – this is neighbor love!

There are lots and lots of things that we can do but we have to be thoughtful. Think of them as ways to love your neighbor. Think of them as ways to practice what 1 John tells us – “we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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 to help?” Think of them as ways to be in step with the Good Shepherd. The way we live – the daily choices we make – show how serious we are about neighbor love. And the way we treat the environment shows how well we understand how much love God has for the whole of God's creation and how well we understand how truly interconnected we are.

You may have seen on the news a couple of weeks ago about the whale that washed up on the shore in Spain. Researchers wanted to know why it died. They found 64 tons of plastic and waste in its gut. The organization Plastic Oceans estimates that there are over 8 million tons of plastic dumped in our oceans every year.ⁱⁱⁱ A 2015 National Geographic article estimated there were 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic in the oceans and seas.^{iv} I cannot even fathom this. And you ask – what can I do about that? I don't even live near the ocean!! Well – there are some things we can do about plastic consumption. Use reusable grocery bags. Reduce or eliminate your use of plastic utensils, cups, plates, and packaging materials. Just don't buy it! And if you do – recycle it. If you see it on the side of the road, pick it up and put it in a recycling bin. Support organizations that are helping to solve the problem. Vote for candidates that care about these issues. **This is creation care – this is neighbor love.**

In 2012, just up the street from our home in Cornelius, the Smithville neighborhood and the town of Cornelius got together and started a community garden. It looks very much like our garden here in Davidson. People can rent a plot for a low annual fee. They can grow their own food, build community, take care of the earth with responsible gardening practices, and reduce the number of trips made to the grocery store. It is a beautiful bit of green space that is available for young and old, rich and poor, white, brown, and black. Working together on these kinds of earth improvement projects are a great way to care for creation and a great way to show neighbor love!

Back in 2010 DCPC became an Earth Care Congregation through our denomination the Presbyterian Church (USA). This past Wednesday night our session renewed its commitment to the pledge that we took at that time. The pledge begins – “Peace and justice is God's plan for all creation. The earth and all creation are God's. God calls us to be careful, humble stewards of this earth, and to protect and restore it for its own sake, and for the future use and enjoyment of the human family. As God offers all people the special gift of peace through Jesus

Christ, and through Christ reconciles all to God, we are called to deal justly with one another and the earth.”^v The pledge commits us to focus on creation care in our worship, our education, our facilities, and our outreach. Won’t you help us to be faithful to our pledge? **This is creation care – this is neighbor love.**

In 1971 the Dr. Suess book, The Lorax was released. The Lorax paints a grim picture of the future of our planet if we continue business as usual. But there is a ray of hope when The Lorax – who is a mystical creature who speaks for the trees - leaves a word written on a rock. That word is “Unless.” “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.”^{vi} The Lorax, like the follower of Jesus, is called to speak up for those who have no voice. We are called to care a whole awful lot and to work to make life better for those who are most impacted by the poor choices that we have made in relation to Creation Care.

May we not be the Reckless Shepherd who destroys any possibility of a place for the sheep to rest. May we not be the Reckless Shepherd who is careless in our treatment of the sheep. Instead may we - in faith - care responsibly and thoughtfully for all of God’s creation and thereby show our love for God and neighbor.

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Phillip Keller, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Zondervan, Gand Rapids) 1970, p. 35.

ⁱⁱ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, The Green Bible (HarperCollins, New York) 2008, p. I-13.

ⁱⁱⁱ www.plasaticoceans.org

^{iv} <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/01/150109-oceans-plastic-sea-trash-science-marine-debris/>

^v Earth Care Pledge

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1. Our **worship** and discipleship will celebrate God’s grace and glory in creation and declare that God calls us to cherish, protect and restore this earth.
2. In **education**, we will seek learning and teaching opportunities to know and understand the threats to God’s creation and the damage already inflicted. We will encourage and support each other in finding ways of keeping and healing the creation in response to God’s call to earth-keeping, justice and community.
3. Our **facilities** will be managed, maintained and upgraded in a manner that respects and cherishes all creation, human and non-human, while meeting equitably the needs of all people. In our buildings and on our grounds we will use energy efficiently, conserve resources, and share what we have in abundance so that God’s holy creation will be sustainable for all life and future generations.
4. Our **outreach** will encourage public policy and community involvement that protects and restores the vulnerable and degraded earth as well as oppressed and neglected people. We will be mindful that our personal and collective actions can positively or negatively affect our neighborhood, region, nation and world. We will seek to achieve environmental justice through coalitions and ecumenical partnerships.

^{vi} Dr. Seuss, The Lorax. 1971