

“You Are Loved, and Therefore...”

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Michael Slayter, Commissioned Pastor
 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florid

Scripture: Ezekiel 34:11-16

11 “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

12 As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

13 I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.

14 I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

15 I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.

16 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

May God give his blessing to the reading and hearing of his Holy Word.

SERMON

You Are Loved, and Therefore...

When I choose an OT scripture for a sermon, it seems I end up using NT verses to explain and interpret the OT. And that is as it should be. So much of the NT is fulfillment of the OT, especially regarding the words of the prophets.

Let’s clarify something first about prophets. A prophet is a spokesperson, not a fortune teller. Ezekiel was a prophet to the exiled Jews. In the first few chapters of Ezekiel, much time and words are spent describing how the Israelites have strayed from God. It was not just a matter of apathy, but of

evil deeds committed against God, violations of His commandments, idol worship, careless leadership, self-indulgence.

In the earlier scripture, Ezekiel is given explicit instructions about going to the exiled Israelites in Babylon with a message. The message is recorded on a scroll written by God and Ezekiel is told to eat the scroll.

The Old Testament is full of metaphorical messages and I think that includes eating a scroll. From my own shallow-minded standpoint, I cannot see what value there is in eating a scroll. I would want to keep it intact so I could refresh my memory again and again. It does occur to me, ironically, that we use the term 'digest' to mean having read something to the point of complete understanding. Eating and digesting – perhaps that is what our scripture is eluding to. Maybe not.

So, it appears that God is blaming the leadership of Judah for the fact that an outside nation has come upon them and taken so many captive. The leaders' priorities have been focused on themselves and not on the most important thing that constitutes a nation – the common people. The leaders of a democratic society have been called the 'Elected Moralists.' In many cases, that's a joke, both back then and today as well. But, in the strict sense of the word, God prefers to call them shepherds.

You have probably heard other sermons about sheep and how they are not the smartest of animals. Why would sheep make a good metaphor for people in need of a leader? There is one thing about sheep that makes them similar to people; they are relational creatures.

Sheep gather as a flock, not a herd like cattle. They feel a sense of safety and security when they do flock together. But, in spite of their apparent lack of IQ status, they are valued. Sheep can be led. Cattle are also valued, but they must be driven. The only time I have seen cattle act like a flock is when they are following the man with the feed bucket or the pickup truck with the bales of hay in the back.

So, sheep are of commodity value and must be led. And they know their shepherd's voice and depend on him or her. The shepherd is their guardian, their watchman. He will risk personal injury to protect them.

So, why are we of value to God? Are we just a commodity to God? Do we represent some kind of consumable item like loaves of bread? We are much more than sheep; we are loved. We need the metaphor of sheep and shepherds because the totality of God's love is more than we can comprehend. The whole bible is filled with metaphor because the real story, the real cause and effect, the real truth, is more than we can grasp. God's love is more than we can grasp.

So, here is the question: if someone asked you to explain how you know God loves you, what would you say? I think we get so involved sometimes studying the historical aspects of the scripture or the academic exegetical elaboration of the facts, we forget that love, God's love, is the engine that drives the whole thing. From God's viewpoint, we really are a pain in the neck! And God just keeps on loving us.

So often, we read about a prophet or a disciple being sent to spread God's word, to do God's work, to show the face of Christ to others. But in this passage from Ezekiel, God does not use a delegated ambassador. He says, "I myself will search for my sheep.... I will rescue them.... I will pasture them.... I will bind up the injured.... I will shepherd...."

That's a lot of promises. That's a lot of love. In 1 Peter and in Paul's letter to the Philippians, we are told to park our troubles on God's doorstep because He cares for us. God does not expect us to have superhuman capabilities, but rather, He helps us where we cannot help ourselves.

So, we see God saying to the corrupt shepherds of Israel, "Step aside and I'll show you how it's done." God's idea of how it's done doesn't always match up with ours. He puts a huge stinger on the end and says, "...but the sleek and strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice."

When I was a child, we knew that a certain mentality would come over the classroom when a substitute teacher showed up. There would be a sense of order, but we could get away with so much more than on other days. Most substitutes took on a passive role when it came to discipline. However, God did not create a passive classroom in which He told the children to 'play nice.' There's nothing passive when He said, 'the sleek and strong I will destroy.' What it meant to the corrupt rulers should have been crystal clear. Or was it? Maybe not.

But, here's something interesting. That portion of verse 16 may have meant something entirely different. There are two letters in the Hebrew alphabet that can be easily confused one with another (I cannot tell you which ones they are – I just read about them) and that one potential mistake in translating from the Hebrew to Greek hinged on that one letter, and it would change the meaning from 'destroy' to 'watch over.' So, is it 'destroy' the sleek and the strong or is it 'watch over' the sleek and the strong? Either way, God's justice will prevail, but watching over something carries the connotation of love rather than destruction. Which translation would you prefer? Which one is most consistent with the God you know? Your choice tells what side of the fence you are on.

We have further explanation if we continue into verses 17-22. Listen to God's word:

“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but must you tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet?

Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, I will save my flock and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep.”

Now, this tells me that those who have wronged God were part of the flock, then departed from God's ways, but still have a chance to receive God's grace. He will 'watch over' the flock. He will judge. God knows the heart. That is what God told the prophet Samuel when he was searching for a man to succeed Saul on the throne. He told Samuel to look at the heart, because that is where God was looking.

The Gospel of John gives us more to think about along these lines. In John 10:16, Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” Jesus' ultimate aim, which was God's aim, was to shepherd the whole world.

So - does God love us? The theme of God's love is repeated over and over throughout both old and new testaments.

Yes, God loves you. Therefore – and this is the second part of our message today -

How should we respond? How do we show we love God in return? How can we, in our human weakness, show affection to God - something that is not human, but spirit?

So, to start with, let us take a look at what God sees in us. Our scripture says He will heal the sick, bind up the injured, seek out the lost – and the list goes on.

That's okay for God, but why would I do that? Too often we do not emulate the good shepherd. We fail to see what God sees. We overlook the homeless, the elderly, the sick, the poor, foreigners. We fail to set the example of Christian leadership. Genuine Christian leadership is restored by the recognition that each and every individual is of value to God. Those most dear to Him are often unable to express and voice their claims upon their fellows. So, do we give up and say, "Well that's God's part; let Him do that part?" Do we abdicate?

This past Christmas, I had an experience that was a bit frightening, but with a theological twist. One of my grandchildren needed a last minute article of clothing, so on Christmas Eve around 4 PM, we were in the Walmart parking lot. Imagine that! The cars were inching along and I could see there was nowhere close by to park. So, my son and his wife volunteered to hop out, run inside, and call me when they were ready to be picked up at the curb. I stopped, they got out and were about to cross a lane of traffic, when all I could hear were brakes screeching. The car behind me had decided to go around and had almost hit them. In a panic, I threw up my arms in alarm and frustration and the other car went on ahead. The windows were tinted, so I could not see the driver. A few seconds later I pulled up behind him. A young man got out of the car, started walking toward me, and I immediately saw that this guy was street wise. It was obvious he was not a negotiator and he wasn't coming to wish me a Merry Christmas. My last sidewalk skirmish had been when I was 14 and I had that same old feeling coming back to me. He screamed at me and asked if

I had a problem. Surprisingly, I stayed calm, rolled down my window, and told him he almost hit a member of my family. Maybe it was my super-cool demeanor or God in a parking lot, but he stopped in his tracks, did a double-take at me and said, “Yeah, my bad! Now stay out of my face!” And he turned and walked back to his car and I exhaled.

I had not been ‘in his face.’ He probably saw my gesture of alarm. But now, I could see he was embarrassed. His last comment to me was probably just to maintain the upper hand and save face. I was okay with that. As he walked away, it suddenly dawned on me – this was one of God’s flock. His life was in automatic self-defense mode probably out of learned behavior. But, someone with no conscience would not have felt or shown embarrassment as he did. But, he did. A few minutes later, I had my passengers back in the car, we were TRYING to exit the parking lot, and I saw this same young man helping an elderly woman load packages into the trunk of his car, then he helped her into the car.

Months later, as I was preparing this sermon, the reference to lost sheep jolted my memory back to that day in the Walmart parking lot. Is that what he was? A lost sheep? Did I miss an opportunity? Thinking back, the metaphor of the lost sheep started looking more like reality.

But we must look at everyone as God’s children. In response to God’s love, we must love what God loves. Perhaps the driver of the other car is one of God’s scattered flock. Perhaps God will see something good in his heart. He will be held accountable, just like I will.

I am sure you are thinking, “How can I love someone who threatens me or makes me feel uneasy?” That is a hard question. I suppose we should remember the line about not returning evil for evil. Come to think of it, it’s easy to love someone who is nice to you. Jesus said we should love even those who are not. Now that takes some doing! Easier said than done.

Frederick Buechner, a well-known theologian and writer says the bible tells us we can love someone we don’t necessarily like. We can recognize God’s creation in someone who is just as flawed as we are.

Love for God's flock is at the very heart of our church. How can love make this a healthier church? Somewhere I came across some basic rules for this that make sense.

First, let folks know how you appreciate them for their gifts and abilities in spite of the faults you see in them. Don't fake it; be authentic.

Secondly, affirm each other's equal importance in Christ. Salvation is for all of us. Look at each other as children of God.

Next, share needs and problems with each other. Share your time.

Finally, be forgiving, just like you want to be forgiven. That line in the Lord's Prayer is not there just to take up space.

But, I really don't think I am telling you anything new.

To love abundantly is to live abundantly. To recognize people, even people you don't know, as children of God, is to love them.

Without love, the energy of life is gone.

Love must be eternal because that is what God is. We must see things through the lens of God's love.

With love in your life, everything you do is eternal and worth doing. The moments that stand out are the moments done in the spirit of love. The final test of religion is not religiousness, but love. It's not what I have done nor what I have believed or achieved, but how I have discharged the common charities of life.

We will be judged by our withholding of love, because this is working against the spirit of Christ. Withholding love is as though Christ had never lived or never died.

I recently read an article which stated that all of Paul's letters can be summed up in eight words, two sentences:

"You are God's children. Now, act like it."

Dr. Charles Ringma is a man who writes commentary about a lot of theological topics. He says, "My neighbor is that special person whom circumstances have placed within my circle of contact. Not everyone is neighbor to my neighbor, but I and a small group of others are. This brings with it special opportunities and blessings, for in my neighbor I can experience something of God's general design for human community. I can also experience something of the reciprocity that makes life rich. And by faith I can see my neighbor as the one for whom Christ died." Like the guy in the Walmart parking lot.

It has been said that we are a society obsessed with perfection. That is, obsessed with thinking we are not good enough. We are not beautiful enough, smart enough, rich enough, strong enough, quick enough, and so on. But, God says we are. Yes, we have some flaws, but He says, "That's okay, I'm a forgiving God." Yes, He says, we are good enough and the Cross of Calvary is solid evidence to that fact.

We are loved. Therefore, we must love what God loves.

Amen.