

Easter 4 – Year C
May 12, 2019

Sermon

Pr. Lyndon Sayers

John 10:22-30

Reflections from Loon Lake

Earlier this week Pr. Lyle and I attended the BC Synod Study Conference for three days together with colleagues at Loon Lake, a UBC retreat center outside Vancouver. Apart from startling a black bear while I went for a run, thankfully the bear ran in the other direction, it was a joy-filled and rejuvenating experience. Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary in St. Paul served as our keynote speaker. She challenged us to offer a fresh take on Good Shepherd Sunday. Perhaps you did not notice it is Good Shepherd Sunday because our gospel reading only offers the slightest hint about the good shepherd. It is like catching the end of a song on the radio and thinking, "That song sounds familiar, I wonder what it is."

Given our lectionary, the series of readings we follow in a three-year cycle, you would have to wait until this time next year to hear the parable of the Good Shepherd earlier in John 10. However, when we open the passage in a Bible we see the rest of the story surrounding it.

Next year we hear about Jesus as the gate who brings security to the sheepfold. The year after that we hear about how Jesus the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Eternal life in John

While our gospel today doesn't directly mention the good shepherd, it refers back to the parable of the good shepherd. Jesus says the sheep know his voice and follow him. He also says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

There is more in Jesus' promise of eternal life than meets the eye. Often we hear eternal life and we first think about having a home with Jesus in heaven. While that is true, John wants us to think about eternal life today. Karoline Lewis reminded us during her talks at Loon Lake that John reveals to us Jesus' promise to be with us in relationship here and now. Yes, he promises for us to be joined to death and resurrection, to be raised together with him, but the resurrected life begins already in this life. These are words of practical daily living for followers of Jesus effective immediately.

Another thing Karoline Lewis did was challenge us as "working preachers," that's her term since she has a blog called, "Dear, Working Preacher," to find one thing in gospel text and try to unpack that one thing.

One thing: Jesus' promise to protect his followers

The one thing I want to focus on is unpacking Jesus' promise about eternal life. Jesus makes very specific promises that his followers will never perish and that *no one* will snatch them out of his hand.

Note that Jesus does not promise that his followers will never suffer or experience hardship. But rather that nothing is more powerful than his claim of love upon us. No idol, no hardship, no violence is great enough to separate us from the love of God. Jesus promises to be there for his followers, including us, no matter what.

At the end of the day isn't that the kind of promise of security we desire and need these days? Think about all the kinds of things on our minds. A recent report reveals we have a \$7.4 billion money-laundering problem in the province, which has contributed to inflated house prices among other things. This is a big reason why so many people are over-leveraged in their household debt load.

We already have our first wildfire burning near Fraser Lake and people have needed to evacuate their homes. Scientists have warned us that climate change is leading to dryer conditions and more frequent and intense wildfires.

We think about people facing serious medical issues or a recent death in the family.

These are the kinds of things that keep us up at night, wondering how it will all work out, how we will get through these challenges. In the face of adversity Jesus promises that he will not lose any of his sheep. No one will snatch them out of his hand. And this isn't just pie-in-the-sky dreaming. Jesus is very down to earth in this passage, which is why he employs the relationship of a shepherd and sheep.

If you've ever been on a farm around livestock you know that they smell. It's an acquired taste. Shepherds or ranchers don't mind the smell or getting dirty. It's just part of everyday life. So too Jesus loves us no matter our smells, our peculiarities, all the weird things about ourselves we don't want company to know about. Jesus knows us for who we are, with all our anxieties, worries, and fears. And he loves us and protects us in the midst of everything that threatens us.

"God is stronger than the community's enemies"

Oswaldo Vena, New Testament scholar, takes things a step further widening the circle of protection. He highlights how Jesus has always stood together with the most vulnerable in our midst, those who have experienced harassment and violence. Oswaldo Vena writes, "God is stronger than the community's enemies. We would benefit from never forgetting it, for it will determine our response to the harassment. As Paul said in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us; who is against us?" These are words of faith.

These are powerful words: "God is stronger than the community's enemies." Do we dare believe them? So often we deal with worries around finances, concerns for the future and our children, health issues, and the threat of harassment or fears of violence and war. And yet in the midst of all these things, Vena reminds us to hold fast to what matters. God is with us. God's love is stronger than any of these forces, including our enemies. And that is reassuring knowing that we are not alone.

Being in Relationship together

Before I wrap up I want to share one story from our time together with Lutheran colleagues at Loon Lake. Through our time together I was struck by how many talented rostered leaders, deacons and pastors, we have in the BC Synod. It is was my first time meeting them altogether. Meetings like these remind us that we are not alone. We are connected as followers of Jesus, just as the congregations we serve are part of the wider body of Christ.

And all this is possible because Jesus first enters into relationship with each one of us. Imagine the possibilities when we trust Jesus has got our back, that security is not measured in terms of physical might or avoidance of suffering, but trusting that God is closest to us when we are most vulnerable, in the midst of illness and death. It is at times we struggle to find meaning that we also comfort one another and sustain one another in hope and love.

Receive Jesus' love for you today and trust in his constant presence and protection in your life. Amen.