

April 25, 2021 - 4th Sunday of Easter - Sermon notes

Scripture readings: Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

In the movie starring Tom Hanks the character Forrest Gump declares at one point, 'I am not a smart man but I know what love is'. I would like to believe that I have the same ability but sometimes I'm not sure I know what love is. Someone else has observed that, 'if you communicate love to me I will know it'. Again I believe that to be true but sometimes I get fooled into thinking I've received love when it is something else entirely. We all have ways of identifying what love is from the time we are very small and so it might seem unnecessary to spend much time defining or explaining love. The fact that we need to spend time defining or explaining love is that our own failings alongside the failings of other people can distort our understanding of love and so, from time to time, we need to be reminded of how we can tell true love from something else.

John the Apostle wrote a great deal about love and in his first letter he declares, "we know love by this, that he (Jesus) laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1John 3:16) One of the things we know about love from our own lives is that love causes us to do things for others. Love inspires a mother to do without so that her child can have. Love inspires a person to enter a burning building in order to rescue a trapped person. Love inspires acts of devotion and words of poetry. Love inspires someone to place themselves into a place of danger in order to save the one they love. In even smaller ways love inspires us to do things for others such as baking casseroles. This is most generously demonstrated when we recognize that in Jesus' death on a cross a message of love was declared. Some of us have heard the saying, "When asked how much he loved the people in the world Jesus said, 'This much' and he spread out his arms and died." This idea of doing things for other people is what the Apostle John is urging his readers to use as a standard to measure love in their lives. The way Jesus most perfectly demonstrated his love was by putting himself in the position of sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. This is how we are encouraged to determine what love looks like in our own lives. When are people putting themselves out on our behalf? When are we putting ourselves out on others' behalf? This is what love is, according to John the Apostles as he learned it from his Master Jesus.

Love helps us become what God intended us to become and our love for others helps them become what God intended them to become. The psychologist Dr. Gary Chapman suggests that every human being has, what he calls, a 'love tank' which provides the energy for our activities each day. Dr. Chapman describes this more fully in his book about the 5 languages of love but the concept of a tank that gets filled from the love we receive from God and others is one that I find particularly helpful. It is

through this fuel that we are enabled to become what God intended us to become and to do the work that God intended us to do. When we are receiving and giving the genuine article - real love - our love tank is filled with the very best fuel. When we are receiving or giving something else our love tank may be filled but it is filled with something not as effective as real love. Real love is seen in the act of Jesus and the ongoing commitment God has made to us through the Holy Spirit. This love is also described using the relationship of a shepherd to his or her sheep.

In the days of Jesus sheep were extremely important to the life of the society. Sheep wool was used in many different ways, lanolin was often used as a lubricant, milk was used for drinking and making cheese or yogurt, and a fraction of the flock was used to provide meat. A conscientious shepherd not only helped the sheep to find good pastures but the shepherd provided physical safety - sometimes at the risk of the shepherd's life. That is part of what Jesus was speaking about when he was describing himself as the Good Shepherd. We are told that he said, 'I am the good shepherd, I lay my life down for the sheep'. He then compared his love for the sheep with the level of commitment that would be seen in a hired hand. The shepherd would certainly go the 'extra mile' to exercise his or her duty of care for the sheep while the hired hand would answer, 'that's not part of my job description - no one told me about wolves' In our lives as followers of Jesus we are urged to mimic the shepherd and not the hired hand. Jesus indeed went as far as was necessary in order to ensure the security, safety, and feeding for the sheep that were part of his fold. The role of the shepherd was to manage the flock in such a way that it remained healthy and growing. One of the ways in which the flock grew was through the birth of lambs who were then raised within the culture of the flock and who learned to be integrated into that culture by watching the others. But there was another way for the flock to be increased.

In the passage from John's Gospel Jesus revealed that he was, and is, constantly seeking for other sheep and urges his followers to do the same. Through this process the flock would also be increased in size and the new sheep would be integrated into the flock in a slightly different way than lambs who were born and raised in the culture. The culture of a flock of sheep is a great deal different than a human culture but I hope you can see the parallels. In our Church family we have children who are added to our number and raised within the Church culture and who learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus by watching. Others have joined our Church family by being drawn to us through the Holy Spirit and as they are integrated into the family they learn in different ways. The goal is to have one flock and one shepherd and Jesus has announced his intention for that to happen. Love is the atmosphere in which this happens and at the centre of all this talk of love is the command that we know as the Two Great Commandments - love God, and love your neighbour. When we love God with all our heart, mind, soul,

and strength we are enabled to love our neighbour as ourselves. When we demonstrate love for our neighbour we are demonstrating our love for God because God loves our neighbour too. May God help us to continue to live in love and to offer that love in tangible ways to those we meet. In this way the flock grows and flourishes.

As I continue to think out loud about this passage from John's Gospel I want to suggest that the phrase, "I have other sheep which do not belong to this fold and I must bring them in as well" was a reference to those of us who have been brought into the fold over the generations just as much as it was a reference to the people in Jesus' day who were Gentiles. The love God has cannot be contained into one group but always seeks others with whom to share. It is the announced desire of God that there be one flock and one shepherd for the entire human race. It is human resistance to the love that God has poured out on us that has caused many of the divisions we see around us and so St. John urged his readers repeatedly to 'let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action' (1 John 3:18) He does so because he experienced how such actions were used by God to draw all people to Himself. Over and over again scripture urges us to 'put flesh on our love' through actions that communicate this love. It begins with our love for God and our action of worship and service. It continues through our love for our neighbour in tangible actions of service and love. It is in these ways and through the power shared through the Holy Spirit of God that Jesus will have one flock made from all the people on the earth and the tremendous reality is that all those who have been drawn into that one flock share the task of loving God and loving neighbour.

The words, "I know what love is" were put into the lips of the character, Forrest Gump, and ask us if we truly know what love is. I can testify that over the past number of years as your pastor I have witnessed clear demonstrations of love for God and love for neighbour so I know, at least in part, the people in this parish know what love is and how to share it. This past year has challenged our understanding of how to show love and placed some limitations on the way in which we have communicated love in the past but my prayer is that we have managed to keep our own love tank full through our at home acts of worship and our actions of love toward our neighbours. As we look forward to the day we once again gather in person may the lessons of love we are learning assist us in the task of being God's flock accomplishing God's purposes today and into the future.

I hope these few scattered thoughts will be used by God to prompt an action of love from you in the coming days. May God bless you as we all continue to journey with our Saviour.