

“Enfolded by Love”  
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John 10:11-18                      May 3, 2009  
San Dimas Community Church, UCC

The two themes I want to mention today coming from this text are first, the relationship between sheep and shepherd, and second, servant-hood as Jesus, the good shepherd, teaches us. Jesus clearly knows his sheep. He is in relationship with his sheep. He spends a lot of time with them. He is “at their service,” even willing to lay down his life in order to protect the sheep from wild animals. Relationship and servanthood; two themes for today.

Wednesday night on PBS, I watched some of a program on teen suicide. Hamilton High School, had been devastated by the suicide of 4 of its students the prior year. The teachers and principal had become proactive in building relationships with students and also building relationships between students to try and prevent further suicides.

They committed themselves to training one another to hear students’ cries for help before it was too late. Early in the school year, they set aside a whole day to implement a curriculum designed to build relationships. They wanted the students to know each other and to reach out beyond their familiar and comfortable cliques. It wasn’t about forcing close friendships, but it was *to know, to care, to learn how to be kind.*

One activity was called “crossing the line.” The leader asked participants a set of questions and if their answers were “yes” they *crossed the line*. If their answer was “no” they stayed where they were but demonstrated a sign of support in some way like holding up the sign for love. For instance, the leader might ask: “If you’ve ever been laughed at or made fun of because of what you wore to school, then cross the line.” The result was that students realized they were not alone; they began to see themselves as a common community with common experiences both good and sometimes painful.

Another activity I found very moving was called *“If you really, really, really knew me.”* In one small group a teacher talked about his own teen years growing up in a family where his dad was drunk much of the time, beat his mother, and yelled at his kids. After sharing his story the teacher said, “if you really, really, really knew me, you’d know how hard it was for me to say these things.”

How we long to be really, really, really known. Jesus really, really, really knew his sheep. To really, really know someone takes effort. It sometimes means we’re uncomfortable extending ourselves in relationship. Some of us who are naturally introverts get exhausted after extending ourselves even though it is very meaningful, and we love doing it. We may need to go home and take a nap after church. Others, like Gwen, thrive on hospitality. They want to really, really, really know everyone!

I’m not suggesting that you volunteer everything about yourself to everyone else in church, but that within church you find someone or ones who you know you can trust your heart with, your deepest self, your spiritually naked self. A good church has a number of people who will be trustworthy and who will understand.

Part of the role of confession is to reveal ourselves as truthfully human and to receive acceptance and forgiveness within a safe community and before God. In essence, the “words of assurance” mean that God really, really, really knows us and loves us unconditionally.

This doesn’t mean that God never challenges us to be more fully our best selves or do more faithfully the tasks before us. When you love someone, you naturally want to challenge them when they need it and to encourage them when they are discouraged, because you want to

do everything in your power to enable them to be their authentic selves. To be really, really, really known and loved is authentic relationship.

The second theme in today's text is servant-hood. Because Christ is in genuine relationship with his sheep, he is willing to lay down his life, to give his all. This concept became clearer to me when I became a mother. It's that kind of parental love *and more*, that Jesus expresses here. Relationships cost something. Sometimes people come to church just to "do the right thing" and then return to live isolated lives. But that's not the servant-hood Jesus talks about; Jesus is describing the servant-hood of giving it all up for the sake of the other, the community. It is a huge investment of self. Unlike the hired hand who wasn't invested and pulled out at the first sign of trouble, Jesus stays put. I imagine that shepherds had to fight off many a wolf in order to protect the sheep. Perhaps some shepherds actually died while protecting the sheep. At least they were willing to lay their lives on the line.

Servant-hood can be a great sacrifice or small acts of kindness. As followers of Christ, Jesus expects both. Last Wednesday I was required to attend a clergy training in Riverside. Every 5 years we do this as a requirement to maintain our ministerial standing in our conference. One pastor there said that his congregation just didn't like to hear certain things from the pulpit. "They don't like sermons on stewardship or sacrifice. They want feel good sermons," he said. I'm glad I'm preaching to you because unlike that other pastor's church, I believe you understand that authentic life, life that is worth something, comes through sacrifice and servant-hood.

Friday night Tom and I watched *The Changeling*, the movie that was filmed here in San Dimas a couple of years ago. I had to wait until I could watch it on the TV screen because I don't do well with violent scenes, and there were a few in this movie.

If you watch it, I hope you'll think about the role of the minister which (as Barbara Nelson pointed out to me), was a hero in this true story. He models true servant-hood. But the child, Walter, who was abducted and never found was even more a model of servant-hood. We learn that his escape was thwarted because he went back to help his friend whose foot got caught in the wire of the cage where the boys were being kept.

The friend who Walter helped to escape lived to tell the story; we never know whether Walter made it to safety. We know the mother spends the rest of her life searching for her lost sheep.

I like the fact that our bulletin cover shows two examples of being *Enfolded in Love* because we all don't have to demonstrate the same kind of relationships and servant-hood. When we do our part, when we live in authentic relationships, when we show faithful servant-hood, when we demonstrate the cost and joys of discipleship, we receive a glimpse of God's enfolding us in a love that cannot be contained.

And into this beloved community, enfolded in love, we throw open our doors to invite others to come in and be part of the family. We invite them to be really, really, really known and loved. We invite them to let their lives flow forth in sacrificial praise and active servant-hood.

Let there be no doubt, the communion table of the "faithful shepherd" is open to all. We may be enfolded by love, but there's always room for many more. With grateful hearts, we now prepare to offer ourselves and our gifts (gifts not earned by our own merit but gifts first given to us by our maker). We offer these gifts to be used to build God's beloved community of authentic relationships and faithful servant-hood. AMEN