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Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

GIVING NOTICE

There are certain occupations in which a person has to put his or her life on the line to fulfill the job. That's true for many people serving in the military. Health care workers who fight dangerous infectious diseases also are putting themselves at considerable risk. It definitely can also be true for firefighters and police officers. I know everyone who has these kinds of jobs doesn't go into them for the same reasons, but hopefully there is a sense of desire for public service involved. You are probably aware of stories when firefighters have gone into a burning house or building to pull people out and save their lives. We have heard about police officers who have dealt with a hostage situation, who have put themselves at risk not only for the hostage, but have also worked to save the life of the kidnapper. The finest examples of public service come about when they sacrificially put their lives on the line to save someone they don't even know. Children often admire people in these kinds of jobs, because it can be exciting work and sometimes these people get to respond to those 911 calls, rushing to the rescue with a siren blaring. Some video games focus on an imagined form of this work so that players can safely get a bit of the adrenaline rush that can come with carrying out such a job.

The history of firefighting, however, has not always been a noble story. Back in the 18th century, fire companies worked for insurance agencies instead of for the local government. They would rush to a fire, but if the building or house that was burning did not have the right fire mark sign posted showing it was insured by a particular company, they would not involve themselves in trying to put out the fire. It was a rather mercenary practice. There also have been recent cases of certain police officers who have mistreated or even killed someone when there was no appropriate reason to do so. This has hurt the reputation even for police officers who fully live out what is the motto for many departments: "to protect and serve."

In our country, there are not very many who have the job of being a shepherd. At least around here, it's not a very high profile job, and we would not think of it as being a very dangerous job. Of course, back in Jesus' day there were likely a greater number of potential predators of the sheep that were lurking, and there were not the current firearms or the fencing that have made the protective role much safer for the shepherd. Jesus compares himself to a good shepherd. The kind of shepherd/sheep imagery found in John's Gospel is a frequent one found earlier in Hebrew scripture. The region has a long history of sheep being the primary livestock raised there. There also was the story about the greatest king of Israel, David, having been a shepherd as a boy, who fought off or even killed lions and bears when they attacked his flock. That would not have been easy to do without putting one's self at risk. Human beings can be compared to sheep in a number of ways – a bit needy, prone to wander away from the One who knows best how their needs can be met, at times needing to be rescued from some wilderness and the wild things that live in it. Occasionally that wild thing is within us.

The willingness to potentially sacrifice one's self on behalf of the sheep is indication of the quality of the shepherd in the imagery Jesus uses. That's in contrast with someone who is a hired hand, who flees when a predator comes after the sheep. Before this passage, the shepherd is compared with someone who steals sheep instead of caring for them. There were religious leaders at that time and even now, who have not had the needs of the people in their care as their highest priority. Some have been interested in having a prestigious leadership position or control over people's lives more so than in demonstrating true leadership qualities. Some have put the purity of dogma ahead of the integrity of love. As a result, the strength of the faith communities' witness has been weakened.

It's love's integrity that Jesus is interested in demonstrating. And it is the subject matter discussed in the epistle called First John. Jesus' love was clear in his willingness to give of himself fully, even giving his life on behalf of those whom he loved. His followers are told they may need to give of themselves sacrificially as well because true love for God cannot co-exist with disregard for those made in God's image who are in need.

Some religious shepherds focus on God's love for us and our love for God in an exclusive way that does not include the need to live out love for others, particularly those who are in need. Our passage from 1 John asks, "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?" Some would categorize that brother or sister in narrow terms, but Jesus talks about other sheep that are his that are beyond the immediate fold or flock. Love that is from God spills over the limits we might we might try to set for it. There are sacrifices that love requires. That doesn't mean we have to give cash to any and everyone on the street corner holding a sign. That doesn't mean that each one of us has to respond to each and every earthquake or tornado or hurricane. But it does mean for all who are able to give of one's time or money or both through the church or an agency that helps to meet those needs, that responses and even proactive initiatives are part of the love that Jesus models. With Earth Day having been this last week, and with the urgency of human-induced climate changes that are putting significant parts of the world's population in peril, perhaps the question from 1 John needs to be expanded to ask, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees the world's environment in need of protection and refuses to sacrifice in order to help?"

Jesus' style of sacrificial love gives notice to those of us who think of ourselves as his sheep, that we need to give of ourselves if we are to live out the love of God. That love is not just talk; it requires putting oneself on the line for others. When challenges or sacrifices come, Jesus does not resign from his shepherd role. Rather he resigns himself to God's love which moves him to seek to shepherd those who stay with the flock and those who are prone to wander. And he shepherds us toward a similar love that is willing to make sacrifices for the good of others and even for the good of the world. We have been put on notice that the love that comes from God is more than an idea and is not just for the good shepherd.