

## What's Love Got to Do With It? A Love That's Willing to Die!

John 10:11-18

<sup>11</sup>“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

1 John 3:16

<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

As you take your seats, it is good for us to remember that this is Mother's Day - and I'd like to speak a word of appreciation for our mothers and nurturers and for the uniqueness of this day. It's all too easy just to ignore Mother's Day in the church because, like Christmas, it has become very commercialized - another Hallmark Holiday. And that's unfortunate. Robert Fulgham has authored several popular books such as “Everything I Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten.” I was amused at something Fulgham said in one of his best-selling books. He said that one of the very few reasons he had any respect for his mother when he was thirteen was, he said, because “She would reach in to the sink with her bare hands - *bare hands!* - and pick up that lethal gunk and drop it into the garbage.”

“To top that,” Fulgham continued, “I saw her reach into the wet garbage bag and fish around in there looking for a lost teaspoon barehanded – a kind of mad courage. She found the spoon in a clump of coffee grounds mixed with scrambled egg remains and the end of the vegetable soup.” Fulgham said, “I almost passed out when she handed it to me to rinse off!”

“A kind of a mad courage” – those were the words Fulgham used to describe the heroism of his mother. All mothers seem to be possessed of it. Let me tell you how this day came to be. It has some parallels with the old English “Mothering Sunday” which used to be held in mid-Lent, which focused on returning home and paying homage to one's mother. But the modern origin of Mother's Day began in Boston in 1872 when Julia Ward Howe introduced the “Mother's Day for Peace,” which was a day of festivities dedicated to peace. Following the Civil War. As you can imagine, many women were resolved not to send their sons off to any future war where, once again, they might be killed.

Mother's Day received its present form with a special service in May, 1907, at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Grafton, West Virginia. The service was organized by a Methodist Laywoman, Anna Jarvis, to honor her mother, who had died on May 9, 1905. By 1908, Anna Jarvis was advocating that all mothers be honored on the second Sunday in May, and in 1912 the Methodist Episcopal Church made it a day for official observance. Those Methodists raised this idea to the national agenda, long before the Hallmark people ever thought of it, and it is no surprise that the entire nation saw the virtue and necessity of such this day.

The important aspect of Mother's Day, sometimes forgotten, is that this is a day for each of us to remember our mothers, for each of us had a mom. Some of us may not remember our mom. Some of us were lovingly offered to others for adoption and that family became our family, that mom become our mom. Some of us may not have had the very best of moms. All this is true. But we lift up those qualities of sacrificial love which so many mothers and nurturers have offered us. This wasn't intended to be a day for us to be honored if by chance we are a mom. But for each one of us to be thankful for the mother and nurturers in our lives.

So today is a day on which to be thankful for this "kind of mad courage" which many of our mothers have had. There's an old saying that goes, "God could not be everywhere, so God created mothers!" And, while acknowledging that our moms are not perfect like God, and some fall far short, the germ of truth here is that in an important way a mother's love is a reflection of the divine love. That, however imperfectly, embodied, a mother's sacrificial love – any self-giving, sacrificial love – is a reflection of God's love.

And Jesus gave us many images by which to remember and understanding the unique nature of God's love. We read one today: "I am the Good Shepherd." It was something of a shocking image in those days because shepherds were the lowest rung of the social ladder, a rough and smelly lot. It would be like saying "God is my garbage collector" today, but that's the point. To compare God to a shepherd – or a garbage collector – is to honor all those who serve society in any capacity and to remember they also bear the image of God, so get off your high horse already. And when the Bible compares us to sheep, it's not really a compliment. "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his - or her - own way," Isaiah said. Sheep are notoriously stupid, self-willed, driven by their appetites.

The reference to us may not be flattering, but the reference to the shepherd is quite apt. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am

the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.” God is the one whose heart is torn out if we come to harm. A “hired hand”? They don’t care – they’ll run away at the first sign of trouble. A good shepherd, the best shepherd fends off the wolf and will lay down his life for those under his or her care. It is the good shepherd, not the hired hand, who will go out searching for that one lost sheep – and Jesus knew there were many of them.

And, indeed, it’s so easy for sheep to be led astray. Connie Willis has written a delightful little book called “Bellwether.” A bellwether is that one sheep who has the ability to cause all other sheep to do what it does and go where it goes. If it stands in the corner of a fenced pasture and falls asleep, all the other sheep will just stand there, eating, sleeping, whatever until the bellwether finally moves. All of which to say that sheep are incredibly unintelligent. Connie Willis uses the study of the behavioral patterns of sheep in her humorous story as an attempt to develop a theory that can predict how and why fads and trends begin, among teenagers and all of us. The researcher in the book discovers that Flip, her erratic, forgetful, careless interdepartmental assistant, while seeming totally incompetent, unknowingly acts as a human bellwether, causing fads and trends to crystallize around her as she lurches chaotically through life. Flip is a human bellwether! It’s a great whimsical little read, but it also heightened my awareness of those around us who unknowingly set the lead for others – for good or for ill.

Last weekend, Laurie and I went to Ann Arbor for the graduation of our daughter Talitha. While in the area, we chanced upon an IKEA store. IKEA is a Swedish giant selling furniture and housewares. If you’ve ever gone through the front entrance of an IKEA, you’ll understand the “sheep” reference. People walking along assigned pathways, eyes glancing downward nervously, following large black arrows on the floor, not daring to stray from the path. Heaven help you if you turn around and walk in the opposite direction. You might think you’ll never find your way out and the “path” takes you from one exhibit to another. As it dawned on Laurie that she was trapped in this huge commercial venture – with no apparent exit – I watched the life just drain out of her. Her eyes went blank, her energy drained, she verged on the catatonic. I had to take her by the hand, gently talk to her, and lead her out.

The people were like sheep following a bellwether. No one turned around! No one left the path. And that’s precisely what happens when a bellwether happens to walk off a cliff – entire herds of sheep have been known to follow going over the precipice, one by one. It’s a good thing Laurie had a shepherd to lead her out of IKEA! It’s a good thing for you and me that we have a shepherd, and not just any shepherd but The Good Shepherd who knows the way to the

Father and is not willing to leave even a one of us behind. And yet more. God is like a shepherd who lays down his life for us because such is the nature of God's love.

God's love surpasses all human frailties. We have witnessed the extent of God's love in the death and resurrection of God's only Son Jesus Christ. And, we continue to experience the power of God's loving presence in the intercession of the Holy Spirit. Nothing will ever separate us from God's love. But the crucial element – for sheep and for us – is that we know this shepherd, that we know his nature and his love. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." This is utterly fascinating to me. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." And his voice, that can be heard even by those in other folds, is that of sacrificial, life-giving love. Do you know that shepherd's voice?

Fred Kane is an interesting man. He is a minister, a Vietnam War vet, and a historian of the Air Force. He tells the story about a dinner party attended by the famed British actor, Charles Laughton. After the dinner they gathered in another room to share favorite poems and stories. The host asked Mr. Laughton to recite the twenty third psalm, which he did in his richest style, with trained voice and impeccable timing. Others recited their favorites, and then they came to an elderly woman sitting in the corner of the room, the host's aging aunt. They invited her to share something. But she was almost deaf and had not heard much of what had gone before. She rose and began to recite the twenty third psalm. People were embarrassed for her at first, that she should try what the famed actor had already performed so beautifully. But soon, everyone was caught up in her recitation. Some even began to weep. It was stunning. Later someone asked Mr. Laughton why her recitation had been so moving when she lacked the skills he had as an actor. He replied, "I know the psalm, but she knows the Shepherd."

Do you know the Shepherd? Many say they do, yet really they know only the words, the rituals, the studies, the traditions. But do you know the love that transcends all the forms which would contain it? Do you know God's sacrificial love, which speaks to us even today, and saves us?

A while ago, an earthquake devastated a village in Italy – much as one did just a month ago this year. A young rescue worker named Paul was with an American team in nearby Greece. They made the quick trip to Italy to help. Twenty hours after the event Paul was working with his dog, "Ruby," searching an

apartment building for any signs of life. Suddenly the Golden retriever froze in place and refused to move. It was a sure sign she had discovered something.

A listening device was lowered into the rubble where Ruby indicated she had found something. The sound from the mike was played through a nearby PA system. Suddenly everyone heard the sound of a small girl singing. Somewhere down in the depths of the wreckage a little girl was hanging on to life.

Slowly and carefully the rescuers dug down toward the child. The Italian rescuers had recognized the song the child was singing. It was the little song taught to every child in the village at confirmation:

Jesus, Jesus,  
Not my life but yours,  
Jesus, Jesus,  
Not my world but yours,  
Jesus, Jesus,  
I belong to you.

Soon all of the Italians were singing the song as loudly as they could to encourage the child. Paul and Ruby waited nearby taking it all in...

Suddenly, trouble occurred. The crew was unsure exactly where the child was located. The rubble was causing weird echoes to happen all around. If the crew dug in the wrong place they might cause a collapse and bury the child. The rescuers became absolutely silent wondering what to do next.

Unexpectedly, Ruby gave a low growl. She pawed at the ground. She barked loudly. At first everyone including Paul felt confused. Then, almost all at once the whole group of rescuers followed Ruby's intense gaze. There just outside of the circle of light a tiny hand had risen from the debris. And clutched in the hand a cross on a chain. The very crucifix given to every child in the village at confirmation.

Soon the team had cleared the debris from the space that had once served as the apartment's laundry. They found the frightened but uninjured child wedged between the dryers. Nearby her badly injured parents were also found. All survived. On the flight back home Paul thought about the long night. The little song the girl sang went over and over again in his head. Not my world but yours. Jesus, Jesus, I belong to you.

Sunday morning, instead of taking Ruby for the usual walk, Paul went to church for the first time in a very long time. Not long after that he was baptized and became a Christian. That night in Italy, in that small girl's voice, Paul had heard the echo of the Shepherd's voice and love. May we pray?

In the stillness of this moment, in the provision of your never-failing love, in the silence of our innermost being, we wait upon you, O God. We thank you for those who have cared for us, whosoever they have been. As we remember your love that was willing to die for us, help us

remember who and whose we are that we might live and love and act not out of our own resources, but from the center of your abiding presence in our hearts, that we might lead others to your voice. Amen.