

The Church of the Good Shepherd
140th Anniversary
Historic Eucharist Worship Service
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
October 14, 2018

Let us pray. Holy Spirit of God, may the refining fire of your love reach into our hidden, inmost places and make us one spirit with you. Amen.

The Church of the Good Shepherd started 140 years ago as a Sunday school program for the local farm children at the Ashford School House located roughly at the intersections of Guinea, Commonwealth, and Twinbrook Roads, near the entrance to Kings Park West. Thinking about how sharing God’s love with children has been an essential part of our mission from the very beginning, I was reminded of one of my very favorite children’s stories called, *Mama, do you love me?*

Written by Barbara Josse and illustrated by Barbara Lavalley, it is a story about an Inuit mother and daughter and it speaks to the unconditional love of a parent for her child. In this story, the daughter (referred to only as “Dear One”) is trying to feel out the boundaries of this love. The story opens with the young daughter asking her mother, “Mama, do you love me?” To which the mother replies, “Yes, I do, Dear One.” The daughter then asks, “How much?” “I love you more than the raven loves his treasure, more than the dog loves his tail, more than the whale loves his spout.” She asks, “How long?” “I’ll love you until the umiak flies into the darkness, till the stars turn to fish in the sky, and the puffin howls at the moon.”

The daughter knows her mother is saying that her love is boundless and eternal, but these are hard things for young children to understand. So, she then asks her mother the “But what if...?” questions, exploring the possible limits of this parental love. And, each of these “but what if” questions is followed by an implied, “will you still love me?”

She asks, “Mama, what if I carried our eggs – our ptarmigan eggs! – and tried to be careful, and I tried to walk slowly, but I fell and the eggs broke?” The mother replies, “Then I would be sorry. But still, I would love you.” “What if I put salmon in your parka, ermine in your mittens, and lemmings in your mukluks?” “Then I would be angry.”

The daughter continues to push out the possible boundaries and asks, “What if I ran away?” “Then I would be worried.” “What if I stayed away and sang with the wolves and slept in a cave?” “Then, Dear One, I would be very sad. But still, I would love you.”

Now the daughter pushes the boundary as far out as she can imagine, asking “What if I turned into a polar bear and I was the meanest bear you ever saw and I had sharp, shiny teeth, and I chased you into your tent and you cried?” And the mother replies, “Then I would be very surprised and very scared. But still, inside the bear, you would still be you, and I would love you... I will love you, forever and for always, because you are my Dear One.”

This story addresses important questions about the nature of parental love: What is this love and where are the boundaries? What are the conditions for receiving this love? Just how safe am I in this love? For me, the most important part of the story is when the daughter asks this ultimate question: what if I went away and I changed into something unrecognizable? Would you come for me? Would you still love me? And the mother’s response is “But still, inside the bear, you would be you, and I would love you.” Even more, she is saying, “But still, I know you so deeply that I will always see you, regardless of what you’ve done or where you have gone. You

can never not be found, known, and recognized by me. This is the you that I love and will always love. You are my Beloved.”

Welcome to The Church of the Good Shepherd! Today we celebrate our 140th anniversary. And today we begin a four-week journey of re-discovery, re-collection, and re-membling of our shared history and our shared holy identities as Beloved, Friends, Neighbors, and People of Resurrection.

Our Gospel lesson today is the Parable of the Lost Sheep. While this story is never the one read on Good Shepherd Sunday, this is the one that I always think of first when I think of the Good Shepherd. In this parable, Jesus teaches of the love of God for his beloved children that is so complete, so compelling, that it is like a shepherd who, though he has more sheep than he can count, notices that one sheep has wandered off. And he is so distraught over this one missing creature that he leaves the herd untended to search for it and rejoices upon finding it. What better illustration of the Good and Loving Shepherd than this? And what better illustration of the nature of being **Beloved** than this Lost Sheep, who went astray and was sought out and brought back?

We all have been this sheep at one time or the other. Perhaps some of us have been lost sheep for much of our lives. As one who has often wandered away from the shepherd – sometimes willingly in sinfulness and other times distractedly, only to be surprised at being lost – I am comforted to know that I have a shepherd who not only notices my absence but searches for me and rejoices upon finding me. Being the beloved children of God means that no matter what we do, how far we go astray, or how much we harden our hearts, God is always and forever singing his love song to us; calling us back into relationship, back to the flock. There is nowhere that the sound of his call cannot reach for God calls to us from within our hearts. No amount of sin can mask and transform us into something unrecognizable to God, for in His love is found perfect vision that sees deep within our souls to find God’s very imprint placed there.

That is God’s perfect grace poured out abundantly upon his beloved creatures – the grace that God will always find, know, and love us. This grace is a holy gift because it is unmerited and undeserved, not so much because we are thoroughly corrupted and cannot do anything worthy to earn God’s love, but rather because God loved us before, beneath, and behind any masking and disfiguring by sin. God knew and loved us before we were knit in the womb. God knew and loved us before we could ever go astray. God impressed God’s very image deep within our souls, and it is by the light of that love that He seeks and finds us.... again and again and again. That is the grace of being the lost sheep.

But what about the other 99 sheep who were left to their own devices while the shepherd sought out that irresponsible one? I’ve found myself thinking about those sheep this week. In the same way that I sympathize with the bitter and resentful elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, I also began to sympathize with my imagined perspective of the sheep who were left.

I wondered about how those sheep might have felt. Were they worried because their beloved Shepherd left them alone? Did they grow anxious when he did not return right away? Did they wonder if maybe they had done something wrong to deserve being left behind? Did they begin to suspect that maybe they were no longer worthy of the Shepherd’s love?

Just as we have all experienced being the lost sheep, I suspect we have also experienced times in our lives when, though we did everything right – followed all the rules, were good and worthy – and yet felt abandoned by God. Haven’t we all despaired at some point that we could

not feel God's presence, no matter how hard we tried? Haven't we all worried that maybe this sense of abandonment was the truth and that maybe we were all alone in this world and that we were unloved and unlovable?

The good news is that, like the elder son, that sense of absence – of aloneness – is just as much of a lie as our unworthiness of love. We can no more leave the presence of God as we can make ourselves unrecognizable by God. As His Beloved, God always seeks us out; always recognizes and loves us; always is present – for as His creatures, we cannot be without God. Like the sheep in the herd who are anxious that they have been left behind, we, in our very fear itself, then become the lost sheep that the Shepherd seeks. And when he seeks and find us, God, our Great Shepherd rejoices and says to each of His beloved: “I will love you, forever and for always, because you are my Dear One.”

Amen.