

Sermon 23 April 2023

P.E.A.C.E – the path to godly care #1 Why Care? John 10:11-15

Author Mel Steinbron tells the story of a young child crying out during a fierce thunderstorm at night. The child's mother came to the bedside and said, "I know the storm is scary, but remember, God loves you, go back to sleep." The little girl looked up and said, "I know God loves me, but I want love **with skin on!**"

During the global pandemic most people agreed that electronic means of offering pastoral care, though a helpful stop gap, offered no real substitute for person-to-person care in the church. Real human-to-human care is vital. Care, "with skin on", has no rival.

In this new sermon series, we'll focus on the New Testament's radical model of care - **one-to-another**. We'll see that pastoral care, when it's not merely professionalized or clergy-centric, but modelled on God our Shepherd, leads to a true sense of **shalom**¹ – a people of peace.

We'll unpack the acrostic P.E.A.C.E. later in the series, but today, let me strip back pastoral care using a fundamental question: **Why do we care?**

- **The First Letter of** John puts the answer succinctly: ...since God loved us so much, **we also** ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11)
- The same Epistle begs the question: 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 help? (1 John 3:17)
- And Jesus went as far as to say, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, **if you have love for one another.**" (John 13:34,35)

Today's reading in John chapter 10 helps us to focus on what God's care looks like, so that we can follow in our care for others. Jesus said:

"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." (Jn. 10:14,15)

¹ This Hebrew word means peace, and offers its recipient a blessing of wholeness on their present and future, no matter their current circumstances

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I've never personally found the metaphor of shepherd and sheep very helpful for knowing what God's care is like.² I'm a city boy, with no shepherding experience. The first vicarage I lived in came with a resident ram named Cecil (who mowed the back paddock). Far from knowing my voice or following my lead, Cecil was often scared of me, would often charge at me on moonlit nights, and often escaped our fences. One Sunday I even received a phone call from the movie cinema nearby: "Your sheep is eating popcorn in our foyer," said the manager!

I understand when the bible says "we, all like sheep, have gone spiritually astray."³ But what do sheep have to do with God's care?

Two pieces of background information for John chapter 10 offer a clue::

1. The **nature of middle eastern shepherding**, and
2. **The festival** at which Jesus made this speech.

1. **The Nature of Middle Eastern Shepherding** - Middle eastern shepherding differed greatly from our common vision of Australian sheep stations.⁴ Flocks **were small**. There was typically **one human** per flock. And, the desert was a **dangerous place**. For a brief period of the year the desert bloomed with vegetation. Shepherds would lead their flock to the best fodder by day. But at night protection from predators was most important. They would herd their animals into walled enclosures backing up to a cliff face with waist high stone walls topped by thorny branches. There was one gate, and the shepherd would stand between his animals and any potential harm.

Unlike Aussie farmers driving hundreds or thousands, middle eastern shepherds led their sheep, knew each one, **talked** to them and **sang** to them. Author **Gary Burge** gives an account during the **Palestinian uprising in the late 1980's**. An army officer rounded up all the animals of one village and placed them in a large barb-wired pen. Later that week a woman approached the officer begging him to

² Jesus' audience did not understand the spiritual point of his "figure of speech" (10:6). It was not an intellectual block like mine, but an unwillingness to believe.

³ Isa. 53:6

⁴ And still does. In remote parts practices of shepherding have not changed since the 1stC

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release her flock since her husband was dead and the sheep were her only source of livelihood. The officer pointed to hundreds of animals in the pen, laughing. “If you can prove which of these are yours, I will release them to you. The woman’s son produced **small reed flute** and began to play a simple tune again and again. One by one sheep heads began popping up across the pen and the animals moved forward toward the boy. 25 sheep followed the woman and her son home that day, much to the officer’s surprise.

This background knowledge brings John 10 alive for us:

“[The shepherd of the sheep] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” (John 10:3-5)

I’m now reminded of the Shepherd described by David in Psalm 23: giving nourishment for life, protection from evil, and securing a blessed future – this is what the care of God for us in Christ is like. If we are called to love as Christ loved us, we are called to care as the Good Shepherd cares, with God’s help.⁵

2. **The Festival at which Jesus spoke - The other background** note that illuminates the type of care God has for us in Christ is the Jewish **festival** at which John presents Jesus’ speech in John chapter 10 – the **Feast of Dedication** (10:22) or **Hanukkah**. But this lesser Jewish festival, lasting eight days, was not merely about lights and candles, but commemorated the **rededication of the Temple** in 165 BC by the Maccabees after its desecration by the Syrians. This was a **period when Israel’s spiritual leaders had abandoned their** care for God’s people, instead embracing Hellenistic culture at the expense of Hebrew laws and responsibilities. A key text read by the people during Hanukkah was Ezekiel 34, with its strong critique of “bad shepherds” in an even more ancient period of Israel’s history.

⁵ John 10:14 even suggests this intimate knowledge of Shepherd and sheep is akin to the love shared between the divine Persons of the Trinity (see too Jn. 15:9-10 & 17:10)

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This too helps us comprehend the care of God in the shepherd metaphor. In his speech Jesus contrasted his care to that of mere hired hands or “bad” shepherds. He owns His flock and is passionately committed to them. He will not throw “lambs” to the predators to save his own skin but **will lay down his own life** for the sheep (Jn. 10:11b, 15, 17-18). In saying he would “lay down” his life, he was pointing forward to his sacrificial death for our sake.⁶ The cross is an inspiration and model for the pastoral care we offer to others – sacrificial love that gives others life and peace.

What answer would you give if someone asked, “Why do you care about *those* people?” **My mother used to say** to me “Charity begins at home.” She meant, of course, “We should care for our own, not *those* people.” Note in John 10:16 that Jesus spoke about “other sheep” outside the fold that belonged to him. Jesus was referring to Gentiles, those from other nations that many Jews excluded from God’s promises.⁷ Jesus insisted that all who belonged to him, even those outside the boundaries we set, would form “one flock.”

There are many reasons why people care for others – because they are **family**, or **neighbours**, or partners in a **common cause**, or **co-humanitarians**, etc. But for the Christian, there is a **fundamental** and **universal motivation** for caring sacrificially for others, no matter who they might be – because that’s how **God loves us** in **Christ**.

Christ inspires us, calls us, and empowers us to sacrificially care for others, whether they be people in our **congregation**, **strangers** on the street, or those who **oppose** or attack us – why? Because that’s the nature of God’s love for us and for the world. Such care is a **distinctive mark** of Christian love for others.

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⁶ Jesus didn’t die to save us out of mere obedience to a cause or command, but out of profound loving commitment (see Eph 5:25,27). Wherever “to die for” (Gk. hyper) appears in John, it points to sacrifice that saves (10:18)

⁷ John tells us that Jews in Jesus’ audience that day were unbelieving (vs. 6)