

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**FOURTH SUNDAY of EASTER**  
**“CARING AS AN EXPRESSION OF FAITH”**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**May 3, 2009**  
John 10:11-18  
**8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services**

Caring is expressed in a million different ways. The most meaningful are not always the most dramatic, at least not from the side of the caring person. Simple gestures and casual expressions of kindness or concern can lift the spirit and warm the heart of another person.

There is not a more helpless creature in the world than the human infant. Without direct and continued care, in a variety of ways, a baby will not survive. As we grow we learn to care for ourselves. But it is never enough. We are relational beings and every day of our lives each of us needs care that only someone else can provide.

Jesus referred to himself as the *“good shepherd”* who lays down his life for his sheep. If the test of love is the extent of its sacrifice, there is no greater love than Jesus’ love for us. Our Shepherd truly cares for his sheep.

Who cares? The question can be an insensitive, sarcastic expression from someone who doesn’t care. Or it can be a sincere question from someone in need of care. In a world like ours, everyone needs care. In the history of religions there are many different understandings of God. Some see God as remote and essentially uncaring about human concerns. The biblical view, however, is of a God who is both caring and present in human affairs.

*“Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,”* begins Psalm 80. The psalmist’s image of God as a shepherd is a profound and almost inexhaustible analogy. It is also a natural comparison for an ancient Hebrew. Shepherds and sheep were as commonplace in the biblical world as sandals and sand. Shepherds who were owners of their flocks, as distinguished from hired hands, were zealous in the care of their sheep. Few animals need care more than sheep,

and they are extremely dependent on the shepherd. God had been the Shepherd of Israel through generations of famine and plenty, peril and peace, faithfulness and falling away. God had remained steadfast when they became faithless. God had forgiven their waywardness and renewed the promises of old. Without their Shepherd, the Israelites would have either wandered into oblivion or been destroyed by their enemies.

The psalmist gave immortal expression to this image of God in **Psalm 23**: *“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . .”* With this lovely psalm in mind, 17th-century poet George Herbert wrote: **“The God of love my Shepherd is, / And He that doth me feed, / While He is mine, and I am His, / What can I want or need?”** The prophets of the Old Testament also used the shepherd image when speaking of God. *“[God] will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”* (Is 40:11)

The image of God as Shepherd has near-universal appeal. Far beyond the lands and times of the Bible, people readily identify with a God who guides them and cares for them like a shepherd. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is impossible to find a better analogy of the relationship between God and God’s people than that of the shepherd and the sheep. We still sing: **“The King of love my Shepherd is, / Whose goodness faileth never; / I nothing lack if I am His, / And He is mine forever.”** (Henry W. Baker)

Given Jesus’ oneness with God, it seems natural that his followers would associate the shepherd image with him. Jesus used this analogy himself when speaking of his ministry, and in John’s Gospel we find Jesus identifies himself as *“the good shepherd,”* who *“lays down his life for the sheep.”* Now, it is true that protecting a defenseless flock in open fields might involve times of danger from wild animals. It is also understandable that a shepherd who owns the sheep would take risks to protect the sheep that a day-laborer might not. But at this point the analogy breaks down. No shepherd willingly goes to his death for sheep! Yet Jesus uses the phrase about laying down his life five times in this passage. Probably Jesus did this both for dramatic effect and as a way of preparing the faithful for his death. At any rate, it makes him not only a *“good”* shepherd but a unique one.

Already Jesus has been calling out his own sheep from the fold of Judaism. But now he indicates that he has *“other sheep, that are not of this fold,”* that is, people outside of Judaism - - Gentiles. Because this larger

flock would come about as a result of Jesus' death, the mission to the Gentiles would have to be carried out by his followers.

Here is a clear indication that Jesus Christ was not only the Messiah of the Jews but was also the Savior of the world. Jesus' sacrificial death was an expression of loving care for all people. Whereas an ordinary shepherd might accidentally lose his life in an emergency, Jesus freely decided to ***“lay down”*** his ***“life”*** of his ***“own accord.”*** Jesus would not lose his life because he was helpless but because he was obedient. God would honor that obedience in the resurrection. The cross of Christ has become the universal sign of God's everlasting care for all of us and for each of us.

On turning 100, jazz musician Eubie Blake said, ***“If I'd known I was gonna live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself.”*** In our self-indulgent culture we are not even very good at taking care of ourselves, much less others. But, as the body of Christ in the world, we are called to be a community of caring. Human need is not due to a shortage of resources, but to a shortage of caring. There is enough in the world for everyone's need, but not enough for anyone's greed. The simplest act of caring can turn a tide of deprivation, of desperation, and even of cruelty.

When Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball in 1947, he suffered terrible indignities. Robinson played for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and on the team's first road trip he was heckled in Cincinnati. During the pre-game warm-up, Pee Wee Reese, the Dodgers' shortstop, walked over to Robinson, the second baseman, spoke to him and put his arm around his shoulders as a gesture of support. It silenced the crowd. Doris Kearns Goodwin calls it ***“one of the finest moments in the history of baseball.”*** (*Wait Till Next Year*)

All about us are those whose pain, poverty, hunger, and hopelessness cry out, ***“Who cares?”*** If the Lord is our Shepherd, if we are the body of Christ, how can we possibly be silent?

That is the history of this church! When every other white congregation in the city of Denver wanted to remain pure white, Dr. Babbs demonstrated that caring is an expression of faith. Who cares? Dr. Babbs says, “we care”. Our caring today is an expression of our faith.

Peter and John met a beggar at the gate of the temple. He asked them for money, but they gave him something money could not buy. They healed him of his illness and gave him back his self-respect. People always need love as well as their more obvious needs.

The selfish person asks, “**What’s in it for me?**” The shallow person asks, “**What will it cost me?**” The spiritual person asks, “**What can I do for you?**” The only things we keep forever are the things we give away as expressions of love. Ironically, it is when we give that we receive. Jesus knew this better than anyone: “*Those who lose their lives for my sake will find them.*”

This is the church that has a legacy of caring. Come, “**Grow your spirit with us.**” I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.