

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abided in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10:1-18

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He 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." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. 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. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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."

## "Our Shepherd"

When it comes to matters of ultimate concern to the soul, (life and death, moral conscience, meaning and purpose) what I've noticed is that friends and family at services of remembrance for loved ones who have died, fall silent the moment they hear the opening verse from psalm 23. **'The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.'** At the time of death the soul wants what it wants. The image of shepherd for God seems to grab everyone's attention. **'Thou makest me to lie down in green pastures.'** Grieving souls need to be comforted with faith in a shepherding God who cares for them. **'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me.'** Uncertain souls need to be assured that a Shepherding God is making a special place for them in their Maker's heart. **'Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of my enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.'** Fearful souls need to be relieved from the dark shadow of feeling alone and on one's own. **'For thou art with me.'** In matters of ultimate concern to the soul, meditating on the image of a Shepherding God is faith's time for soaking up 'God-With-Us-Presence'. Here, WITH is the watch word. With is about internalizing Holy Companionship. The soul wants what it wants. And what the soul wants is companionship of a Good and Merciful God. **'Surely Goodness and Mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.'**

When Mercy companions and shepherds us through the darkest valleys of our lives, broken hearts are healed. Hearts made of stone are softened with compassion. In her book, "God's Tender Mercy," Joan Chittister tells the story of Ann Hines, a single mother of an only child. When her son, a freshman at college, lay murdered by a seventeen-year-old drifter who first solicited a ride from him and then when he got in the car, turned a gun on the young driver, Ann descended into a pit of anger and vengeance. The murder was a random, groundless, indefensible act. Her son was not the only person who died that night---Ann was alone, distraught, full of the kind of pain and hate that paralyzes the heart and stops life in its tracks, even for

the living. Her son, a good boy, a successful student, the hope of her life was gone. She herself was completely alone now, without a future, without hope, without any reason, it seemed, to live. Thirteen years after the shooting, Ann Hines visited her son's killer in prison, intent only on getting information about the night of the killing. But when in the course of the conversation the young man put his face down on the small table at which they sat and began to sob, she touched the man. And she got to know him. The story shocked the country. "How could she do such a thing?" Or more to the point, perhaps, they asked themselves the question, "Could I ever do such a thing? Could I possibly show mercy to someone who had done something so senseless, so heinous, so destructive to me?" Ann's answer to the question was a simple one: "If my son was sitting in this room" she said, "I'd want someone to reach out a hand and lift him up." Mercy, commented Chittister, is what God does for us. Mercy discounts the economic sense of love and faith and care for a person and lives out of a divine sense of love instead (God's Tender Mercy by Chittister, p. 8-9).

In Christian faith and practice, Goodness companions us through the darkest valleys of our lives as we mediate on the 'Christ, the Good Shepherd' image. In John's gospel he has Jesus saying of himself: . . . **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.** Here, it is the sacrificial nature of Jesus' Love that gives courage to one's heart. Chittister wrote: 'History records that on 9/11, not one, but thousands of souls also learned the mercy of God the hard way. Their heroic stories of sacrificial love have opened our eyes to the amazing presence of the sacred and spirit of courage that is alive and well in and among us. In a recent U-Tube release, Boatlift, we are inspired by yet another. In it, we heard (for the first time?) about the largest sea evacuation in the history of humankind . . . ½ million people rescued by boat within 9 hours. For the first time we heard Vincent Ardolino, Captain of the Amberjack, tell about his compassionate heart. "I'm the type of person, he said, who can't stand to watch other people suffer." So when his wife tried to keep him safe by keeping him home by saying: "What if they attack again?" Vincent replied, "I have to

do what I have to do. . . . even if I only save one person from suffering and death." For the first time in Boatlift, we learned that the Coast Guard issued the invitation to all boats (tug, fishing, sightseeing) to become rescue boats. For the first time, we heard one hero give voice to his need to let-go of an internalized set of rules in order to say, 'Yes, I'm on my way.' "You have to forget about what they teach you in school---and believe that what you are about to do is the right thing to do." For the first time we saw hundreds of boat lovers and sailors, converge into dangers unknown, to lift zombie looking souls off Manhattan's lower shores' (ibid).

A hand extended to lift up her son's murderer, a courageous rescue of a whole island of strangers opened the ears of those in Christ's Church to hear their marching orders from the Beloved disciple John: **We know this, that he laid down his life for us---and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.** But because the Shepherding metaphor for God and Christ is central to our faith and essential for our spiritual growth and development, it is important that we take a look at one more good shepherd story about Jesus. It's the one about Jesus leaving his 99 children in the sheepfold to go out and find one sheep that was lost. I like this story because it helps to aid the Holy Spirit's work of "consciousness raising" in the church. As the 99 sheep who are safe and sound in the sheepfold, it causes us to wonder and question among ourselves: Who are the lost, alone, and at-risk children of God that Christ is out there looking for now? This question is an important one for Easter people ask in our journey as a community of resurrection faith because I believe what Joan Chittister said is true: "The death of Jesus left a fledging faith community bereft until they themselves rose out of his grave to begin life over again, wiser for what they knew, stronger for what he was, determined now to finish what had already been begun."

Prayer. The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Amen.