

Fourth Sunday in Easter

Psalm 23/John 10:11-18

I am tempted to do a number of things here at the end.

I am tempted to say everything I think needs to be said, to give you some final account of anything else I might have said if I were to stick around, sort of a fast forward of several years' worth of sermons. A theological and biblical tour de force in which I unravel the mysteries of God and Christian living.

The more I thought about it, however, the more that sounded like some form of eternal punishment.

I am tempted to speak of how much Dianne and Doug have meant to me, how tender I feel when I let myself think for even a moment of their kindness and their devotion to this time on Sunday morning, and to our friendship, which is a gift beyond measure and beyond description.

I am tempted to give the finest sermon I can, to honor what you have meant to me and will continue to mean to me wherever I end up. The problem there is that my own history tells me whenever I set out to preach a good sermon, instead of the sermon I need to preach, it usually turns out to be neither.

I am tempted to be wistful and remember my first sermon in this place, when I was interviewing for the job and I chose to preach on the Transfiguration, which should have been a warning sign to the search committee.

I am tempted to remember my own college chapel experience, where I spent my next to last Chapel service trying to preach a sermon that was absolutely terrible because I was trying to sound like my college Chaplain.

I am tempted, in short, to try and say everything. And the problem with trying to say everything is that you usually end up saying nothing.

So I know better than to think I can do or undo anything with this last handful of Sunday morning words.

Not that the words don't matter, they do.

Our words matter a great deal. I remember when Henry began trying to speak for himself, having decided that screaming was not getting him all that he wanted.

Mollie and I sat on the floor with him, transfixed, waiting for that first word, as if he might utter something akin to wartime Winston Churchill, or Jesus' secret beatitude.

Words matter particularly for us Christians. Our Muslim brothers and sisters call us "People of the Book," because we take the words of scripture seriously.

I remember being a child in Sunday School and having to learn the 23rd Psalm that we read from today, so that I could get a sticker on the all important progress chart, which at the time I was pretty sure was being closely monitored by God.

I cannot count the number of times I have silently thanked that Sunday School teacher for teaching me those words, in King James English, because long after those gold stars ceased to matter very much, that Psalm has carried me through times when I had no words of my own.

The early Methodists made a big deal out of last words in particular. They even went so far as to publish accounts of believer's last few moments of life. The idea was to let others know that, even at the end, these folks were faithful. That in the face of what people fear most, Methodists tended to look towards God.

When John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, died in 1791 at the age of 88, friends gathered in his room at his invitation. He desperately wanted to write something, but when someone put a pen in his hand, he couldn't hold it. His caretaker told him "Let me write for you, sir; tell me what you would say."

"Nothing," he replied, "but that God is with us."¹

Our words matter.

A friend called me last week and asked me to come and visit her in the assisted living facility she is in. She is suffering through a disease that affects her motor skills, and now makes it difficult for her to call to mind what word it is she wants to say.

When I got to the nursing home, she asked if she could tell me the story of her redemption, so that I might write it down. "I'm worried there is a day coming when I won't be able to say it for myself," she told me. "I want people to hear it even when I can't say it anymore."

Our words matter, but they are always rooted in what we do as much as what we say. A preaching professor in preaching class, of all places, pointed out to me that people don't remember sermons, they remember actions.

Frankly, I would like it better if I could be theologically robust, compassionate, and articulate for 12-20 minutes on Sunday while wearing a robe, and have you forget my Monday through Saturday behavior, but preaching has never worked like that.

I must have listened to 30 or 40 hours of Rev. Joe Elmore, my pastor when I was growing up. I cannot tell you a thing he said. I can't give you one illustration, I can't tell you if he followed the lectionary or how he dealt with the ending of Mark's Gospel. All that time sitting in a pew, and I can't pull a single sermon out of my memory.

But I can tell you that when I was in fifth grade, and going through confirmation, he sat down with me in his office for 15 minutes, just the two of us, and he asked me what I thought about God.

¹ Telford, John. *The Life of John Wesley*.

Years and years of his carefully prepared Sunday morning reflections, and yet what I love the man for is that he asked a fifth grader to tell him something.

The very word “pastor” comes from the term in the Bible for shepherd. It is a good corrective for all of us that think this job is merely about words.

When was the last time you met someone who spoke really well and said, “Wow—you should spend your time watching sheep?” It is a reminder that the work of caring for human beings in the name of Christ is more like watching over sheep than it is delivering good three point messages.

And so when Jesus sits down for one final meal with his disciples, for a few last words, perhaps he too is tempted to say everything. To try and let them in again on what is about to happen, to prepare them for all that is to come.

But instead, he talks about sheep.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd risks everything for the sake of the flock, even life itself.

“That is the difference between the good shepherd and the hired hand. The hired hand will stay with the sheep for awhile, but the sheep do not belong to the hired hand. When things get difficult, the hired hand will disappear.

“The sheep know my voice, because I am their true caretaker. I lay down my life for you, my flock, but also for those outside this fold, who have not yet heard my voice.

“I have come to bring them life as well, by laying down my own. My life is not taken from me, I give it freely, because I trust that when I take it back again, all those who hear my voice will find life as well.”

Ever since the shepherding major failed to really take off here at UE, not many of us have been in regular daily contact with sheep.

And so it's a bit frustrating when Jesus keeps choosing sheep imagery to describe his love for us. When we describe how we love our friends, we rarely, if ever, call them sheep. I am imagining a new single from Kelly Clarkson, “Love Ya Like a Shepherd, remix.” It doesn't really work.

And frankly, since we are all so intelligent and computer-savvy, hearkening back to a nomadic image of shepherding doesn't really inspire us much. We need words that are a bit more complex, a bit more intellectual.

At least I do. I have the hardest times talking about grace because it is so simple. I want God to be more complex, so that I can justify spending more time thinking about God than doing anything.

But Jesus, as complex a character as he is, as dynamic a God he embodies, Jesus keeps it pretty simple.

In John's first letter, he writes to the churches, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

That's a nice thought, but I'm much better with the words than I am with the actions. Most Christians are, I think.

We like to form committees and task forces, sure, but in reality, these are just excuses for more words and speeches.

Or, like me, you spend most of your words trying to convince people that maybe this stuff is for real, and maybe they should act like it, but you forget to mention that God is a God of grace.

That God is a good shepherd. Which makes me want to research Bedouin shepherding practices and come up with some clever anecdote about how the sheep really have to work hard, but that's not what he means.

He just means that he will be watching over us. That our God is a God of radical grace, who goes looking for those who are lost, who speaks with a voice that we recognize, who desires that we stay with the flock we have been given. That our God walks with us even through the valley of the shadow of death, that our God prepares a table for us when our lives are crumbling apart in our hands. That, just like Wesley said, God is with us.

The Jesus who showed up the first time, and will show up at the end of time, and who gathers with us for worship in the meantime, is the good shepherd. And the good shepherd is different because the sheep belong to him, unlike the hired hand, whose commitment only counts from 9 to 5.

This Gospel takes its words seriously. In the prologue, when John is attempting to describe how Jesus is not just some gifted teacher or miracle worker, but part of the very being of God, he uses the word "logos." Word. Jesus is the word God most wants us to hear, the thing God needs to say.

But when God chooses to give a word to humanity, he doesn't just speak it. He doesn't just say it, he doesn't just write it down. He wraps it up in skin and bones and sends it into the world, where it will heal and feed and teach and shepherd and live and die and one Sunday morning bust out of an unsuspecting tomb.

Our words matter. Don't ever forget that. But the word that matters most is the word of God in Jesus Christ. The Word made flesh. God with us.

That is why, frankly, it doesn't so much matter who wears the robes in this service. We are just the hired hands.

When my grandmother passed away, she had served as the secretary of her little southern Baptist church for over 52 years. She had worked with several pastors during that tenure, some of whom had known her for decades—they knew her family, her late husband, everything about her. They would have been more than willing to come and deliver a beautiful and tender eulogy that recognized all that she had done.

But my grandmother had left specific instructions that the new pastor, the one who had been there less than a year, who was still green and didn't know her husband or how she had been in her best years—she made it clear to us that the new pastor was to perform her funeral.

Why would she do such a thing? Because she wanted to teach that little church, even from beyond the grave, that this was her pastor *now*. She could do something like that because she knew it was not the hired hand that made the difference—the one who matters is the Good Shepherd, and that doesn't change, no matter how topsy-turvy our world seems.

And the truth is that life is always on the move. Especially in a place like this. Don't be fooled by the stateliness of Olmstead, or all those "started in 1854" signs that make this place seem old and stable.

For those of us on the inside, we know that nothing could be further from the truth. The bricks and wood and mortar may stay put, but the things that make for a College—the lives that pass through it—have been moving nonstop since those first 150 students and their 8 professors started classes in Moores Hill on September 9, 1856.

Those 150 students have long since graduated, and a couple of those first eight faculty have retired now, and we step now into that deep river of change that is the heartbeat of this place.

Even for those who are staying, the ground is shifting beneath your feet. Because you cannot stay in this place and not be transformed by it.

We are who we are because of our relationships, and if this place is worth the paper that its 155 year old charter is written on, if it is worth the lives of all the women and men who have taught and studied and wept and laughed and prayed on this sacred ground—it is because it has been a place where people opened themselves up to one another. Where against their better judgment, they fell in love, felt a call to be more than they meant to be, wrestled with an idea until it became their own.

Where they discovered that their words mattered.

The life of faith is not about having it all together. It is about approaching every moment with the naïve audacity to believe that love might just win. That hope might be worth it. That God might be calling even you—even me—to stand in that awkward space between the plain old broken world and a new creation, to speak and live out a new word.

Whether you are going or staying, whether you are apathetic and exhausted or overwhelmed by possibility, whether you feel like your path is paved with golden bricks or you are stuck on a merry-go-round, it comes down to this: God goes with us. The Good Shepherd will never abandon us.

As we take our leave of this place, to go our separate ways, hold on to these moments we've shared together. Stay honest about the light and darkness of the world. Be yourself.

When God feels the most far away from you, watch the shadows, because the promise of Christ is that every time it seems like he's gone away, he is just preparing a table for us, shepherding us through a dark valley.

And while I don't know a whole lot, I do know this much: our paths will cross again. It may not be for awhile, but the secret promise of the table is that for all of us who hold out hope, there will be room at the end for each of us, to take our seats, to open our hearts, and to be ourselves at the great table of Christ.

I am tempted to try and say everything, but the truth of it is, I have nothing to say. Nothing, but that God is with us.