

Sermon April 22, 2018 Shepherding the Earth Cara B. Hochhalter

1 John 3:16-24 and John 10:11-18

... This is called Good Shepherd Sunday...People of the Holy Land knew about sheep...and they know about sheep even today...and some of you know about sheep and goats! I remember riding in a small bus in Palestine and a boy leading a whole flock of sheep crossed into the road in front of the bus...this must happen frequently because our driver just patiently wended his way through this wooly wave of surrounding sheep-ish-ness...

Let us be in prayer: Shepherd God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

You know in the Bible there are two Johns...one is the Gospel and the other, 1 John, was a commentary on the Gospel....apparently written by an elder of the church for a later community. There are some lovely images in 1 John. It asks how we can let God's love *abide* in our hearts, if we are stingy with others? This could be a whole sermon right there...how can God ABIDE in our hearts...if we are stingy and fearful and greedy? The writer of 1 John calls us all, "little children"... and asks us not to just love one another with our words only, but also with our deeds...and in truth! Another sermon!

Then we have John of the Gospel who writes that Jesus described himself as a Good Shepherd...one whose sheep know him and through him know the abundance of life. What does this mean for you...to think of God/Christ/Spirit...this Larger Love of Divinity....as caring for both the single one who wanders off, and also expansively keeping an eye on the whole of the flock...?

Just before this, Jesus compares himself to the gate-keeper.....the one through whom the sheep pass, in and out, finding good pasture.... I am trying to imagine this infinite, loving, creative care-taker...within whom we find our true selves.

And Jesus said there are other flocks too, who respond to this Voice of Love.... Do you imagine others denominations of Christians who hear this Christ-Voice in slightly different ways...but with the same Shepherd through whom we live and move and have our being? How about people of other faiths...Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus....so many other people of faith who also are called to *love and compassion*...in

some ways. Is the same Shepherd their gate-keeper?...Is this the same Infinite Love through whom they know themselves even as they perhaps use different names?

Now let us broaden this flock to include all of creation...all of life's creatures, including the plants, the birds, the animals of every kind...is not this Shepherd of Love embracing them, too?

I think so.

On this Earth Day and every day, God must surely be longing for us to care for our earth more wisely. Some say that the Earth has always gone through cycles and this warming is just one such time, and this may be true to some extent... but it is absolutely true that as humans our behaviors affect the health of our planet....

Early this morning I saw a New York Times quiz about practices that make a difference. I didn't do very well on the quiz and now I cannot find it again...but it said among the many efforts that are good and worthy, the one that makes the most difference is...our refrigerants...checking out our refrigerators and air conditioners to make sure they are not emitting too much carbon into the atmosphere!

The green page in your bulletin has good explanations and resources put out by Global Ministries, an organization with whom the UCC is a partner. They suggest a louder voice from us; calling for the preservation of God's creation and providing justice to "the least of these" most affected by global warming by enacting smart public policies reducing carbon pollution.

The UCC Council for Climate Justice has spearheaded an interfaith effort to preach *a thousand sermons* in solidarity with the 21 children and youth who are suing the federal government over climate change. Have you heard about this?

On their website it says: *The damage done to our climate is an issue of justice that particularly impacts the young who are now inheriting our world. Actions taken today significantly impact their present and future. With more than a thousand sermons on this critical issue of our time, the ripple effect upon faith communities and the broader world will be indelible and far-reaching. Moreover, it will be a collective statement that sends a signal to the rest of society of the urgent need to act.*

Well, I'm not sure how far-reaching this sermon will be but I am preaching about climate justice....as we shepherd our earth. Young people are speaking out! I was inspired when our own Briel Gibson shared her research on the amount of plastic that is found in our oceans and the terrible effect it has on fishes. Young people have a

clearer vision for what this world is doing and I applaud their energy and ability to speak out. Just recently in Florida, a group of young people from 10 to 20 years old, including an 18-year-old University of Miami student who is studying marine science, filed a constitutional climate lawsuit against the governor, Rick Scott, and the state of Florida, asking for the creation of a court-ordered, science-based "Climate Recovery Plan".

I know that there is an attitude in our country that there are too many regulations, but I am sure many of you witnessed how the pollution of lakes and rivers were reversed through environmental regulations. I know that what we do to our land affects more than our own little pieces of it...we are connected to a larger whole...

What can we do? Although I admit that I feel hypocritical because I still cannot seem to remember my cloth bags when I go into the grocery store...I will make a commitment here and now to limit my use of plastic and to support businesses who act sustainably in their own practices....we can do this, can't we?

Our church is now urging others who use our church to use the dishwasher instead of creating plastic and Styrofoam waste...this may seem like a small thing...but it is a start. And there are those in our church leadership who are talking about using some remaining Capital Campaign funds for insulation in the walls of the church to save on fuel consumption...this will be considered and voted on by the congregation at our May meeting!

Many churches are acquiring solar panels, creating organic and community gardens, and advocating for environmental justice in many ways. As in so many social issues, churches often lead the way...often with inspiration from youth!

At the Interfaith meeting the other night, Sheila shared beautifully about the Good Neighbors program and a Jewish man, Jostle?, talked about how he grew up eating Kosher foods...he never could understand why there were so many rules about which foods could be eaten together. His mother told him it was a discipline. He decided to make his own *code of behavior* in terms of what he ate. He had heard that slaves are still used in the production of chocolate, so he decided that he would only eat "Fair Trade" chocolate...He reminded us, "We have choices...about how we live!"

As first John wrote, how can God abide in us if we are stingy? The Good Shepherd cared for the well-being of his entire flock....we are all on this Earth together and we can be part of a movement of caring.

Let us remember the words from Deuteronomy:

Blessed by the Lord be the land,
with the precious gifts of heaven,
with the dew, and the deep that lies beneath,
with the precious fruits
 brought forth by the sun
and the riches
brought forth by the moon,
with the greatness of the ancient mountains,
with the abundance of the everlasting hills,
and with all the treasures of the earth
 in its perfection.

May we allow our lives to flow through the love of an Infinite Creative Spirit of this Earth....and may we "shepherd it with care!" On this Earth Day...as we remember Jesus did not compromise who he was so that his sheep might pass in and out through his far-reaching Way of love and truth....we know what is right. We know that even our small efforts can and will make a difference.

Amen.