



"A BOLD FOLD"

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 10:11-18

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, April 21, 2024, Easter #4

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

John 10:11-18

10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

10:12 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.

10:13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

10:14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,

10:15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

10:16 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.

10:17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

10:18 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."

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God

Safety exercises from truth telling (safety within yourself) Faith is really about believing there is something within you that is God given that no one can take away from you.

This word, safety, is so loaded these days. Safe for who? Safe from what? Safe for what? And how does God participate in safety?

We are not protected from harm in this life—we are vulnerable to it everyday
And we are protected from harm in this life—we are held in Divine love everyday

We need each other for safety and protection.
And we also create feelings of vulnerability and danger for and with each other.

We all have within us parts who trust and parts who don't trust—we have protectors, we have firefighters, we have managers, we have exiles—all of us have shepherd parts and sheep parts and wolf parts and hired hand parts.

(shepherd, sheep, hired hand, wolf)

Fold and flock

Fold is the enclosure, or the sheep within the enclosure.
Flock are the creatures themselves.

This community is a fold—a group of people who identify ourselves as Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. What kind of safety do we need to be faithful? What kind of safety do we need to let go of to be faithful?

Sheep

Sheep are actually not stupid. They are herd animals—and have a high degree of social intelligence—in a sheep kind of way. They feel most comfortable in the herd—and not just any old herd, but the one they know. When they feel threatened they come in closer to each other.

They form complex social bonds and remember high numbers of sheep—one study found that sheep could remember the faces of up to 50 different sheep over a period of several years.

Prey animals and their one defense is to run—they run in unison.

Sheep do have special parts of the brain that allow them to remember the faces of particular humans and particular sheep.

For sheep there is safety in numbers.

Strong flocking instinct is what makes shepherding even possible—for one person to look over a big group of sheep.

- Sheep are social animals, so try and prevent seclusion.
 - Sheep by nature are followers; let them follow and don't drive them as you would cattle.
 - Sheep are docile animals by nature.
 - Sheep have good memories; these memories need to be positive ones as much as possible.
- Sheep like routine, so be patient when introducing something new.
 - Sheep reactions are predictable, so use them.
 - Sheep react negatively to loud noises and yelling.
 - Sheep will bunch up in corners to protect themselves.
 - When moving, gathering or sorting sheep, the more efficient the operation the better; wool grabbing and rough handling will cause bruising.
 - Sheep tend to move in the opposite direction of the handler.
 - Sheep have a flight zone, determine what this is for your flock.
 - Sheep move best when not afraid, so work slowly and calmly.
 - Sheep do not like to move into the darkness; place a chute facing a well lit area.
 - Sheep move better on a flat surface or uphill.
 - Sheep will move towards other sheep.
 - Sheep will move to a partially full pen.
 - Sheep will move better through long, narrow pens and chutes rather than square pens and wide chute systems.
 - Sheep resist moving from one type of surface to another.
 - Sheep have no depth perception, so shadows, dark surfaces and water are an issue.
 - Sheep fear new visual objects
- Grazing animals so have eyes on the side and can see a broader periphery, especially when head is down—like horses.

Wolves

Also turns out a lot we've been told about wolves is wrong, too. A misunderstanding back in the 70s is what led to American culture's obsession with the alpha male in wolf packs and has justified a lot of white male corporate behavior since. This became a way our culture has normalized abuse of power and dominance.

"The typical wolf pack, then, should be viewed as a family with the adult parents guiding the activities of the group and sharing group leadership in a division-of-labor system in which the female predominates primarily in such activities as pup care and defense and the male primarily during foraging"

https://www.wolf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/267alphastatus_english.pdf

<https://www.sciencefriday.com/segments/alpha-wolf-myth/>

https://www.wolf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/267alphastatus_english.pdf

Shepherds

- A worker of importance, but not of great social status
- A well developed motif for a style of kingship in prophetic tradition (Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, etc). There are many ways God's leadership is depicted in ancient Jewish landscape—from warlord to shepherd
- Jesus evokes that shepherd motif—he does not choose warlord, he chooses shepherd—relational, with the people, attentive, protective, supportive—being known, belonging
- Not an outcast, but not a wanted job—hard work with not much reward. Important for the community, but invisible (what job does this remind you of in our time?)

We are creating and tending a culture here at GCPC where we practice creating safe containers for people to thrive—and by thrive, I mean get what we need to be fully seen in our humanity, in our dignity, and in our vulnerability, and in our strength and wisdom.

We are finding our way in creating and tending this culture together—because creating a container where we can show up as our full selves is not the same as anything goes. It is not that anything and everything we bring to the table is something that nourishes the community.

Sometimes we have to slow down and attend to harm in order for us to move forward in trust and vitality.

Unacknowledged harm is harm that keeps on harming. And all of us have been wounded by personal and collective unacknowledged harm—we swim in that harm everyday in a country that has actively denied the truth about our history. And we are living through a withering white lash against the truth of our history—just when we were starting to take a look at the truth, the reaction has been all encompassing—books, education programs, affirmative action, supreme court justices, federal, state, and local laws—it's all around us. Harm that takes away our shared ability to honor the full humanity of all people.

What we are doing here at GCPC is of deep importance—and by importance, I mean it is impactful and abiding on a deep level. We are teaching our bodies and our collective to tune our nervous systems to a different kind of atmosphere—where we get to practice the things we've been denied in the larger world, we get to say the things that have been silenced, we get to feel the things that have been buried. And this is all for the healing of not just ourselves, but of the world.

We are sheep, we are shepherds, we are wolves, and we are hired hands. We are the sheepfold and just part of the flock, we are the door and the field, and the grass that can nourish growth and a sense of provision. We are all these things—because Spirit is creating the conditions for us to be bold in our clarity, our courage, our compassion, our curiosity, and in our community.

We are the Body of Christ—all the parts, all the pieces of Jesus' presence in the world.

We are a bold fold, Grace Covenant—that means we know what's at stake and we know we need each other to create true safety and flourishing—not just for us, but for all people. Don't underestimate the part you play in who we are becoming. We need all of you to be all that God is calling us to be.

Thanks be to God.