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Made for Goodness

“I came that they may have life, and have it to the fullest.”

These are the words Jesus says right before the passage we just heard. And I believe they are important words to hear because I think they speak to the whole of what it means to follow Jesus, who we recognize today as our Good Shepherd. I’ve said it before and will say it again: I often wonder why & how Christianity has become one of the world's largest religions. Especially considering Jesus does not purport to say that his “way” is unencumbered. I mean a few verses earlier he said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind!” What does that even mean? How did he garner and gather almost a third of our world, 2,000 years later, to follow him, when what he is saying is seemingly nonsense, or at the very least seemingly contradictory?

While I don’t want to bore you with a Bible lesson from the pulpit (even though this is church) I do believe it is important that we understand where the Good Shepherd discourse comes from in our larger Gospel narrative. Because Jesus’ expounding on himself as the Good Shepherd is not done in a vacuum. It’s done in response to a specific healing event, that of the Man Born Blind. As it begins with his disciples coming to him and asking “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” To which Jesus responds, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned.” And then he spits on the ground, wiping freshly made mud on the man's eyes, so he can go and wash and see. Kind of graphic, really dirty, but there you have it. And isn’t it that way with life. It’s gritty, real, and dirty, and there’s no way around it. And yet, so often we try to hide the reality that this world, or moreover our own personal lives, are messy and dirty and real. We try and maintain the facade that it is all kempt and clean and perfect. But, no matter how hard we try, things happen, sometimes without explanation or rhyme or reason, and then we (much like the disciples) don’t know how to handle it. We look for an explanation or a reason for why to quote the infamous line, “bad things happen to good people.”

As Jesus expounds on the idea that he is the Good Shepherd, who has the power to lay down his life for his sheep and take it back up again, John tells us, those listening were divided and many of them were saying things like, “He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?” But, others said things like, “These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” It makes sense that they were confused, I mean who wants to follow the lead of someone who says that our life must be laid down in order to be taken back up again? But, my friends, I will tell you a secret, God’s math, is not our math. Or as Desmond Tutu jokes: “God doesn’t know very much math, because when you give to others [your life, or joy, or love that is], it should be that you are subtracting from yourself. [And yet] in this incredible kind of way,” Tutu says, “you gave and it then seems like in fact you are making space for more to be given to you.” Just think of it, you purchase a gift for yourself, it's nice, you enjoy it. But what if instead, you purchase a gift for someone else, someone you love. And, you give it to them, and you witness them open it with joy and enthusiasm, you watch them use it with love and care, and the purchase is all the more valuable and all the more worth it because you gave it away. And so it is with God, and so it is with life. Because everything we have is a gift from God, and God gave it all away so that we, and maybe God as well, might enjoy it all the more.

So, why and how has the message of Jesus as the Good Shepherd gained traction throughout our world and overtime? I mean he says that salvation is ours if we just follow him? But, I've been following for 36 (almost 37 years) and the world still seems to be in shambles and my life no easier, so why? Why? Because, I believe, and I hope, and I have even seen, we are made for goodness, which is why we follow our Good Shepherd. And, it's why God came down and lived among us, because God knows we are good, even if and when we are flawed. It's why Jesus allowed himself to be betrayed, denied, and crucified, to rise and come and be among us again. It's why the Spirit descended to live and move and continue to encourage us, because we are made for goodness. We even have science to back it up, as neuroscientists have found that "generosity is one of the four fundamental brain circuits [along with resilience, outlook, and attention] that map [in our brains to create] long-term well-being." Scientists even link generosity with better health and longer life expectancy. Just thinking about generosity increases proteins in our bodies that support the functioning of our autoimmune system. Because we are made for goodness, which is why, I believe, we, along with millions of others throughout centuries, take part in the body of Christ, generously laying down our lives for one another. So that we might achieve something like life to the fullest, not just for ourselves but for others as well. Which is why we do things like filling our blessing box and cleaning our parks. Or listen to another's perspective especially when we do not agree, and taking on one another's prayers especially when they are close to our hearts. It's why we give our time to meals on wheels so others may eat, and read to children in schools so they may learn and grow and thrive. Because, we are made for goodness, and even when we fall short, we can listen for the call and strain our ear to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd. And so today I pray we might experience and know that you are made for goodness because you have a good shepherd who can lead us back to one another, back to love, and back to life to the fullest!

Amen!