

Calvary United Methodist Church
May 12, 2019

BELONGING

Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

Pastor Jeff Fisher

I'll ask that our kids come forward. Good morning! How many of you are ready for a summer break? Why are you ready for a summer break? Anyone tell me? School is not fun. Who would know that? It's a lot of work anyway. I always like learning, but it is difficult at times. Anyone out there ready for a summer break? Teachers, all of you teachers? No? We just like breaks.

What do we do in the summer to re...what happens? When you say it's not fun, did you ever have one of these days? I think adults get these at work too, so I don't want you to feel bad that we get those moments as well. But there is a lot of reason we like summers. I call it renewal time. We like to be refreshed. Do you like to be refreshed?

What do you do on a regular day to be refreshed on a weekend when you are out of school? What do you do? (Child speaks.) You watch TV. What do you do on a weekend if you want to be refreshed? (Child speaks.) You go on vacations. Pastor Bob, what do you do to be refreshed? (During the summer?) Anytime. (Anytime. I do like to ride a bicycle.) Ride a bicycle. (I do like to do yard work.) Ok, work is fun too. Somebody else; what do you do to be refreshed? (Child speaks.) Sleep, that works for me too.

Well, there are a lot of things that we do. Sometimes we just like to get out in the dirt, like Pastor Bob says gardening and being out in the yard doing yard work and stuff can be a fun thing. Sometimes we like...a lot of people find refreshment at the beach. Some people really do that. They love it so much, they like to watch the sunsets, they like to watch the sunrises, they like all those things. Some people don't like the beach as much as they like to go to the mountains and they sit around a campfire and they find themselves refreshed or sitting and camping and smelling all the outdoors, whether it is at the beach or in the mountains. And riding bike as someone has just shared with us, Pastor Bob.

And there are those others that we really need to recognize. And just like the summer lovers, they like this. You know there are a lot of people here who like to ski and play in the snow. So we find whatever it is that makes us refreshed and it's a good thing that we find things.

The Bible that we read week after week, day after day, of our lives tells us the importance of being refreshed. It says this, and I want to read the children's one first actually: Those who want to do right more than anything else are happy. God will satisfy them.

For the adult version it says: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; they

will be filled.

You see, we have a thirst. School is not enough. I need to rest. I have a thirst for vacation, a thirst to be renewed and I have a thirst to be more godly, a thirst to get to know God and to do that I come here. We listen to sermons, we sing hymns of praise, we pray together because we want to become more godly.

Have you ever been really thirsty? When our souls are hungry for God, hungry for truth, hungry to do the right thing and thirsty, we seek God in all that we do. There are so many Bible stories you have heard lately about water. We use it to clean ourselves up. We do it for baptisms. You saw some of you last week, it reminds us that we are washed clean as new. And every time we come to God we are reminded, especially during communion and things where we take not only the new life, but the body. We are reminded of the renewal that comes from God and it comes from God's Word: True happiness through hunger and thirst is righteousness.

See, what I wanted to know today is that we want to do the right thing. God invites us to do the right thing. And doing the right thing isn't always easy to do, is it? Sometimes we have to do things that aren't easy at all. It is putting our hands together and a part of what we are doing this day is remembering something very important in ministry here at Calvary called Calvary Cupboard. Now you have helped with this before and it's a wonderful ministry because there are a lot of people in our communities and around the world that with this ministry we only really help those in our community by giving food.

You can imagine if you were an older person and you can't work anymore and you don't have enough money and someone is giving you food. Do you think you'd be happy? And what if you were a young family and you couldn't afford it and someone says to you: I'm hungry. Would you want to help them if you could? That's what Calvary Cupboard does. It's all about helping.

And we are reminded, we can't fill millions of people's bellies, but we can help somebody and so here we come and the volunteers of this family called Calvary work here two times a month on the second and fourth Thursday of most months because we want to give a hand up; we want to help people and by giving that hand up we pass out these bags, I would like my lovely helpers to stand forth. We are going to invite you to hand out these bags. And it tells you the ten most common needs of the cupboard and when the children come forth, I am asking anyone who would take a bag to please stand up and very quickly I'm asking all of the children here to take a bag for anyone who will stand up and a bag, if you'll take a bag and bring it back next week please do so and these young children are going to take some bags and go pass them out. As soon as you get your bag take you seat so it can go on and we thank you in advance for doing God's bidding because we want to help those who we can help.

We thank you and if you don't get one right now there will be more bags available after the service. We thank you because you are indeed making a difference by doing the right thing and we praise God that we can do that.

I really love this scripture from Matthew: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled. The more we seek God, the more our thirst and hunger will be met.

And children again we thank you. When you are finished you can return to your seats. And you may come up and get a fruit snack as well.

Message:

Pastor Bob Cook

Would you join me in a word of prayer as we look at the scriptures today? So, Gracious Lord, help us today, to hear this word, to understand what it means: that you are our shepherd, we are the sheep of your pasture. Release us today from all of the things that bind us, that we may worship you in spirit and in truth. And so may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I don't think there is any image of Jesus more beloved than that of the Good Shepherd. It is portrayed all over the place. You've grown up maybe in churches where it was in stained glass windows, artwork in Sunday School. I mean it is just everywhere. In one of the churches I served we had a large stained glass window that I faced from the pulpit area and it was, of course, Jesus as the Good Shepherd. It was a beautiful window, actually. The sun is coming up in the east, Jesus is barefoot, he's got a flock of sheep behind him. He's carrying the lamb that was lost on his shoulders and the flock is just happy again. He's there. And that window, actually, and it is actually right there, has an anomaly in the window which I found one day and that on his right foot, Jesus has six toes. I've never figured that out, other than Jesus is just like us but a little different.

Sheep in Palestine aren't kept so much for meat as they might be in the British Isles or Ireland; they are kept for wool. Wool is such a valuable renewable commodity with sheep that a healthy flock keeps the shepherd's family in clothes and blankets and with the extra yarn spun from the wool they have a means of cash, a source of that. And shepherds are highly motivated to care for these sheep and to do anything they can to watch over them, protect them, keep them safe and lead them into green pastures as the Psalm says.

Now, shepherds do spend a lot of time with their sheep. They know their flock. They train their sheep early on to hear their unique call. And when different flocks gather together in the same space, a shepherd can tell whose sheep are his or hers simply by the call, because they will come running. Now, sheep do prefer to be in groups, but they do wander off, they do get lost. They have this ability to just kind of like be mindless. They do tend to not have

the ability to protect themselves. They are easy prey for wolves and coyotes and other kinds of things. You may even recall David when he is about to face Goliath, he said, I have taken a lamb from the jaws of a lion and I've fought even a bear and that's when he was doing his shepherd's duty.

But, despite the creatures being willful and stubborn and difficult, not at all like us, the shepherd does everything in his or her power to protect the flock. It's a good life to be a shepherd, not an easy life. We had a bishop, Fred Wertz, remember Fred Wertz? When he retired he moved to New Oxford and he got some sheep and I remember him saying: I wish I had done that early in my ministry. It was so helpful to him.

Well, Jesus describes himself in John's Gospel as the Good Shepherd and he spends a lot of time in the 10th chapter of John in this metaphor. It's likely his family had a little flock growing up, that would be very common. It was very probable that caring for the flocks was one of the tasks that Jesus had just as a boy. So he is speaking from experience when he talks about his sheep. Now, the setting is a winter's day. It's at the festival of lights with dedications, it's the festival that now days we would call Hanukkah. It's the celebration of the restoration of the temple and of the nation after a terrible occupation where much blood was shed at the hands of the Syrians 175 years before Jesus. He's walking through this area called Solomon's Portico. It's an old and revered park of the temple, had actually been spared from the devastation the Babylonians had done if you know all that history. If you don't know the history, just ask us. We are happy to tell you that stuff. No one ever asks. Anyway, he's walking through there and a group of religious leaders come up and they encircle him, the way that you'll see reporters with their mics and their cameras out encircling a political figure or someone at court or any of those places. And they left no path for him; he couldn't avoid them and they were contentious. They were in his face and they demanded that he reveal to them plainly: Are you the Messiah, the Christ, the long awaited One for God or not? They wanted a yes or no answer.

Now, Jesus never falls into a trap and he answers very obliquely. He said: I've told you, you don't believe. Look at the works that I do, they bear witness of me. But you don't believe because you are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice and they follow me and I give them eternal life. And they shall never perish. Neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand.

How many of you have ever confronted Jesus with a direct assault just like those leaders did, right? You find yourself frustrated, impatient, angry. Things are not going the way you want them to go. You are struggling with whatever problem or issue or difficulty, trying to keep your head above water and others tell you: oh, just have faith. Be patient. Trust in God. But they are not in your position, so you start asking of the Lord those if questions, you have a lot of them. And you say: Jesus, if you are God, if you are so all powerful, if you are so all loving, if you are real, if you are really the Messiah, then stop talking to me in riddles. Stop hiding yourself when I long for a word from you, just something, when I just need to know

you are there for me, just answer in black and white for once would you?

And how does he respond? Well, I've told you and you don't believe. You are not hearing my voice. And sometimes just in the silence we have to hear his voice. This is the think about Jesus. He can't fill up anything that is already full and when we are full of ourselves, how can he fill us, which is why when we are empty we get filled.

It's not that we don't believe; it's not that we don't want to believe. We really do want to believe, I get that, you get that. Just that when we ask Jesus to stop keeping us in suspense, when we just ask that he speak to us plainly what we are really saying is: I don't know that I can trust you. And his reply, well, it seems to suggest that belonging to him depends on believing in him. But what he is saying is exactly the opposite. You struggle to believe because you don't consent to belong. Belief doesn't come first; belonging does. We baptize a child. They are not able to answer for themselves. Their parents and we must do that. But they belong and we grow them into that belief. But it's no different if you are 55 or 75 or 95, we grow into that belief because we know we belong. You come to church, you realize: I belong.

I remember walking into a church in 1980 after a very difficult experience in ministry. It was a different church than I had been a pastor or an assistant pastor at, but I realized that I belonged with God's people. It was the most wonderful feeling. I really had a place despite that hard experience. And that belonging comes through the daily walk with the Lord, it comes through this relationship you have with the Good Shepherd.

Now, Jesus' answer isn't what those temple leaders wanted to hear. They wanted to believe from the outside. They wanted a version of things that would not require them to step into the sheep pen and muck around with the other sheep. Their version of a messiah was someone who would be just like them, would help them hate and expel their enemies; someone who would affirm their exclusive bond with God and their version of the messiah was one that would justify their smallness and their narrowness and cozy up to their problems with solutions that really solve nothing.

So, there is something not to miss here too: those leaders, sometimes like us, were in a nice cozy system of their own. They were profiting by it and as Jesus questioned their system, as he disturbed it, they understood they had a lot to lose. They were full of themselves, and as I said, how can he fill someone who is already full of themselves. And never mind those who they are hurting with their unfairness, never mind those who are being kept down or kept poor or kept on the street because they were putting this in their pockets. They wanted to hold on to that system more than life itself, but that system would lead to a dead end and what Jesus wanted to do for them and for us too is to lead them into the open life giving green pastures.

He remind us he is the Good Shepherd because he cares for the sheep. He reminds us sheep

that we belong to him and without the shepherds care, well, you know, sheep tend to wander off, lose their way, become prey to a predator and the Good Shepherd wants to bring those sheep back. He will even give his life for them to protect them from the robbers and the bandits and the predators and so grant those sheep abundant life. We are his sheep and you belong to his flock.

And he tells us that everything depends on belonging to him: my sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them life eternal and they shall never perish.

Have you wondered why the world we live in is so fearful, so overwrought with worry and concern, so defensive we can hardly talk to one another and we feel like we have lost our connection to God's presence? People right now out there are ugly to one another. But here in this sheep pasture, the shepherd is here. We reconnect with him.

As we reconnect with him, little things that have caused us worry, the things that the talking heads and the media or the stuff we read tell us that we should be worried about, they don't matter. He protects us. He is present. We belong to him. And every time we share in our baptism, the baptism of another, we affirm our baptism, that we belong to Christ for this life and life eternal, that in worship together we realize our belonging to God, our sacred worth, which is why this isn't just some exercise, this is life giving and important. We haven't made it that way for other people. We've just made it about church. Really the focus is on our Shepherd.

When an infant wants to be in the presence of its mother, all it wants to do is be held, to experience that sacredness of belonging. And it is an incredibly powerful thing to watch a mother hold their child and all through life we want this experience of belonging. Sheep know their shepherd because they are his; they walk, they graze, they feed, they sleep in his shadow beneath his rod and staff, with constant connection to his voice and they believe because they have surrendered to his care, to his leadership, his authority, his guidance. So you belong to God; you belong to God for this life and life eternal. Don't walk out of here not understanding that, that his presence in your life tell you there is no need to fret, to worry, to fear. Sometimes I do fret and worry and fear, but the Gospel tells me I don't have to because the Good Shepherd includes me and you in his flock. We belong. Amen