

Easter 4 April 26, 2026 “Good Shepherd Sunday”

Prayer: Good Shepherd of the flock; as we hear your word this day, as we hear your voice this day, may our trust and faith increase and may your love guide us always. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our Savior and friend. Amen.

Today as we gather, we celebrate “Good Shepherd Sunday,” this annual day when we remember Jesus as the Good Shepherd. And of course, for us gather here in Barre this morning it is such a significant day every year, because we are the Church of the Good Shepherd. Our identity is bound in that image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who knows and cares for us and the one whose voice we hear. This is the one who calls us by name and leads us.

Perhaps this lesson from John’s Gospel is even more significant this year because of the warnings Jesus provides as well. Usually we do not pay much attention, or at least I certainly do not emphasize these warnings in my reflections of this lesson, but this year given the troubled times in which we live it seems more relevant and important. As Jesus delivers this teaching, he draws a clear distinction between the call of the Good Shepherd and the actions of those Jesus terms thieves and bandits. These bad actors seek to deceive and lie, using falsehood to draw the sheep away from Jesus’ Way of Love. Now that we find our nation in the midst of an unpopular war, and a war as many commentators have noted, a war not of necessity for the defense of our nation, but a war of choice that seems to have no clear aims or end in sight. And of course, in a combat situation there is always the fog of war, but now the falsehoods and the outright lies seem worse than ever before. The old saying, “Truth is the first casualty of war,” certainly seems applicable in these current circumstances. So Jesus’ clear eyed warning to be wary of of bad actors is definitely something to which attention must be paid in our troubled times.

But there is another threat even closer to home that merits this warning by Jesus as well. Recently in a number of Churches, especially some of those more aligned with a pernicious movement called “Christian Nationalism,” there has been a good deal of discussion that empathy is not a Christian value, that empathy does not accord with the teachings of Jesus. Quite frankly, I was baffled when I first read about this. At the most basic level, as Jesus said, there are two commandments which sum all the Law and the prophets, to “love the Lord our God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and the second is Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than

these.” To love our neighbor is to have empathy, to reach out in care and concern for our neighbor, to care for our neighbor’s well-being and to hold our neighbor’s life as precious in our sight and in the sight of God. Empathy is absolutely fundamental to our discipleship in following the teachings of Jesus and putting our faith and trust in his love into action in our lives. Despite what those who believe that a Christian nation is one in which strangers are no longer welcome as our neighbors, Jesus warns us not to be deceived by these thieves and bandits, by these bad actors. In contrast, a Good Shepherd cares for the sheep, shows concern for them and their condition, reaches out in this care and concern with a soothing voice that knows the sheep by name and calls them into a good place.

This brings us, I believe, to one of those truly lovely, yet a bit mysterious, images from the teachings of Jesus: he says that in contrast to a thief who only comes to steal, kill and destroy, Jesus comes that we might have life and is that was not enough, that we might have life in abundance. I have often pondered about having life abundantly: obviously Jesus does mean here unlimited riches and treasures, or even luxury: what this notion conveys is a fullness, an overflowing cornucopia, a richness, yes, but rich in the plenteous sense, having enough, complete and satisfying. The question, I believe, is how do we have that abundance, that fullness of life? And the answer is quite simple, actually, in that image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, caring for the sheep, concerned for their wellbeing, this care and concern is the basis for an abundance in life, simple by opening our souls, opening our lives to this merciful goodness so freely given. And then, then comes the really good part, in showing that same care and concern to our neighbors, in bring out our empathy, the same empathy shown to us in Jesus’ life, we have an even deeper abundance. This abundantly life Jesus brings us is more abundant in giving it away. This is where Jesus leads us as a Good Shepherd: to give of our lives that we might live, to give abundantly that we might live abundantly. As the Good Shepherd has given his life for us, so as we give to our neighbors we live ever more abundantly in the love of the Risen Christ.

As disciples following Jesus, as the Church of the Good Shepherd, as we gather together to celebrate this love and to renew our commitment to our identity as the followers of the Good Shepherd, we once again are fed, fed nourished and strengthened to live fully, to live abundantly as the disciples of Jesus in our time and in our place. We gather once more around this Altar to bless and the break the bread, to raise these gifts to God and to lift our souls and lives in grateful praise. This is our great joy as

disciples of the Good Shepherd, yes even in the midst of these troubled times, this abundance of life in the Spirit of God's love shines ever brighter for us. Thanks be to God for this grace and thanks be to Christ our Good Shepherd. Amen.