

## **“What Are They to You?”**

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Based upon John 21: 15-23; 1 John 3:11-17

“Simon son of John, do you love me?” the risen Christ asked Peter, after they had enjoyed a post-Easter fish-fry on a Galilean beach. “Yes Lord, you know that I love you,” he replied. “Feed my lambs,” Jesus said. Three times Jesus posed the question to Peter; three times he answered, “Yes I love you.” And three times Jesus charged him with feeding or caring for his sheep. It’s one of the most poignant scenes in the Bible, this moment when Peter was redeemed. Even though the exchange initially hurt his feelings, Peter needed it to erase the memory of his three-fold betrayal of Jesus before the crucifixion. “Yes Lord, I love you; I really, really, really do,” Peter affirmed, no doubt believing in that moment with every fiber of his being that this was his fresh start. But no sooner were those words out of his mouth, than he demonstrated that he still a lot to learn about loving Christ enough to be true to him. Although Jesus had just conveyed to Peter three times for emphasis’ sake the “if-then” of faithful discipleship, “if you love me then you’ll care for the sheep,” all it took was the arrival of Peter’s rival for Jesus’ affections, John, “the one whom Jesus loved,” to separate the “if” from the “then” in Peter’s heart. “What about him?” Peter asked Jesus. Under other circumstances it might have been an innocuous or even caring question. But we can tell from Jesus’ response that this time Peter’s heart was consumed more by competitive jealousy than curiosity or concern. “Are you serious?” Jesus responded, in tone if not words. “If it is my will that he remain, what is that to you Peter? Follow *me!*” Even after all of Peter’s pledges of love and loyalty, when it came to how he responded to certain sheep, he was not yet so filled with the love of Christ that he was freed from resenting them. “What about him?” Peter asked, as if John were still more of a threat to him than a responsibility.

I love this story because it illustrates so beautifully and honestly something that we all do to some extent. We say that we love Jesus, and know that Jesus charged us with loving our neighbors as ourselves, but we still struggle to wrap our minds and hearts around the huge scope of Jesus’ if-then discipleship. If we love Jesus, then we must feed and tend and care for everybody. If we love Jesus, then we must not allow resentment, envy, hatred, or other emotions to convince us that anything less than a loving response to them is warranted. If we love Jesus, we must stop minding their business in a judgmental or jealous sense, and start minding their business in the loving sense, because Christ made their needs our responsibility.

We can say that we know this; we can even affirm it three times out loud. But most of us are no better than Peter at hiding the fact that we still resent some of God’s sheep enough that we wouldn’t really weep if they fell into a ditch, and do not feel inclined to care for certain other sheep for a whole host of other social, political, and economic reasons. We are happy to say that we love God, but like the lawyer who prompted Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan by asking exactly who his “neighbor was” we want qualifiers for our sheep assignment. Writing about that famous lawyer, Frederick Buechner once said that the answer he imagined the lawyer was hoping for was something like: “A neighbor (hereinafter referred to as the party of the first part) is to be construed as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one’s own legal residence unless there is another

person of Jewish descent (hereinafter to be referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as neighbor to the party of the first part and one is oneself relieved of all responsibility of any sort or kind whatsoever.”<sup>1</sup> That sounds about right. We have already decided in our heads which are the good sheep and the bad sheep, someone else’s sheep, and our sheep. We just want Jesus to confirm our understanding so that we don’t have to feel guilty or obliged.

Sheep, neighbors... these are words and concepts that lend themselves to being qualified in the human mind. Perhaps that’s why John, in his first letter to a Christian congregation which was torn apart by internal conflict, decided to go for the heart and gut in his letter instead of the mind, by using the more personal and powerful metaphor of family. “We must not be like Cain, who murdered his brother,” John wrote, taking his readers all the way back to the first case of human resentment and hatred. “All who hate a brother or sister are murderers and do not have eternal life abiding in them.” That sounds like an awfully extreme statement. But Jesus said almost the same thing in his Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘you shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable....” (*Matt. 5:21-22.*) In other words, just because we don’t act on all of our negative feelings like Cain did, that doesn’t mean we are more loving or more faithful than he was. As the expression “if looks could kill” conveys, a hardened heart is a hardened heart whether you act on your feelings or not.

Incidentally, the story of Cain and Able could have just as easily been our Earth Day text last week because it conveys a mirrored version of the lesson that the Hosea text did. Hosea wanted the people of Israel to recognize collectively that their covenant promises to God included caring for Creation as well as one another. In this story, God wanted Cain to recognize personally that he had to care for his brother as well as Creation. In both stories, the land is the witness to human unfaithfulness. “What have you done?” God asks Cain. “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength...” (*Gen. 4:10-12a*). “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain asked, whether with surprise or sarcasm we don’t know. (*Gen. 4:9b*) He learned the hard way that the answer was “Yes. Yes, you are responsible for keeping watch over your little brother as well the land and rest of Creation. You are charged with reverent service to them all.”

If you go back and read the whole of the Cain and Abel story, you’ll discover that Cain is more of a sympathetic figure than the Satan-possessed evil one John describes. Cain worked hard as a farmer caring for the land and making it fruitful. Why God accepted Abel’s offering and rejected Cain’s is never explained. But by offering up this story to illustrate God’s command that we love our neighbors, John was clearly trying to do two things: 1) make us realize the real danger of resentment, anger, jealousy, and hatred to ourselves, others, and all of Creation; and 2) make us realize that the people our hearts are hardened against are family members through

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), 65-66.

Christ. They aren't just stupid sheep. They aren't just strangers outside of our jurisdiction. They are our brothers and sisters, and therefore when we fail to love them, we are turning on or away from our own God-given family.

I've been thinking a lot about family lately ever since the press picked up that it is now a common practice in our country for refugee and immigrant families to be split up by the authorities. In November, a 39-year old woman known as "Ms. L" arrived in the States with her 7-year old daughter after fleeing violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She was seeking asylum here. Yet do you know the first thing our government did to help her after her harrowing journey? The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) separated mother from daughter, putting the mother in detention in San Diego, and shipping her 7-year old 2,000 miles away to a detention center in Chicago.<sup>2</sup> As a single mother of a 9-year old I have to tell you that this is the stuff of nightmares for me. It is so immoral, evil, and contrary to the will of God in Christ in my mind that I can hardly process that my own country did this. But it did, and in fact is doing this still. There are now hundreds of cases of family members being separated because it is an actual DHS strategy right now to do so. They think breaking up families will deter others from coming here.

This past weekend there was a program in D.C. called Ecumenical Advocacy Days for Global Peace with Justice sponsored by Church World Service and the National Council of the Churches. Our denomination and most mainline denominations support this program. In light of the news and climate against immigrants of late, the theme this year was "A World Uprooted: Responding to Migrants, Refugees, and Displaced People." In the preliminary papers posted online from the conference, I learned that there are now close to 250 million migrants worldwide. Forty-six percent of them are women. Just looking at Syrian refugees, three-quarters of them are women and children, with a third of the children being under age 12. The three main reasons that people leave their home countries are warfare or conflict, conditions caused by climate change such as droughts, hurricanes, and tsunamis that make earning a livelihood or living safely impossible, and corruption, poverty, persecution, which threaten certain portions of the population.<sup>3</sup> The people who seek to come here are not trying to take advantage of us. They are simply trying to survive, and we are meeting their pain with strategies which tell them that they are not safe here either, let alone welcome. After they have made it thousands of miles and survived as families against incredible odds, we are separating parents and children to teach them a lesson. "What about them?" we say as if these broken and terrified people are a threat to our glory, our stuff, our ability to be a so-called "Christian" nation instead of our God-given responsibility. "What's it to you if I love them?" Jesus responds. "Tend to my sheep."

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" John asked. The verse is condemning enough in English, but it's even worse in the Greek. Instead of "see," the Greek word "behold" used here conveys

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Burnet, John, "To Curb Illegal Immigration, DHS Separating Families at the Border: NPR", transcript of radio broadcast from Morning Edition, National Public Radio, Feb. 27, 2018, retrieved April 18, 2018 from <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/27/589079243/activists-outraged-that-u-s-border-agents-separate-immigrant-families>

<sup>3</sup> See *Refugees and Migrants Infographics*, Global Compact for Migration, (citing Report of the Secretary-General, *Making Migration Work for All*, 12 December 2017); retrieved April 16, 2018 from <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/infographics>.

more than a casual glance. The word conveys a prolonged, contemplative observation of a brother or sister as a “spectacle on which he allows his eyes to rest” according to one commentary.<sup>4</sup> This is how we now gaze upon migrants, refugees, and so many other people. Instead of “refuses to help,” the Greek says “beholds a brother in need and closes his heart, (or literally his bowels), against him.” In 1<sup>st</sup>-Century Greek culture, the bowels were considered the seat of deep emotions, not the heart. But either way the message is clear: “What kind of person can gaze upon brothers or sisters in need at length, contemplate their plight, and close himself off so he does not feel their suffering enough to offer any help?” We are called to help, to feed and tend to God’s sheep. We are called to put ourselves in their shoes as Christ put himself in ours. This is what love is, that we lay down our lives for one another as Jesus did for us.

Not everyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ these days recognizes that loving God and helping those in need go together. But that’s not a new problem. Frustrated by Christians who focus more on heaven than the hungry, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “It’s alright to talk about ‘long, white robes over yonder’... but people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s alright to talk about ‘streets flowing with milk and honey,’ but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day.”<sup>5</sup> He recognized, as John did, that to profess “Jesus is Lord” is to be given a job. We know this here as well, and work hard to care for our neighbors in many different ways. But it is still a valuable exercise for us to ask ourselves which of the sheep push all of our fear, hate, and resentment buttons so much that we close our hearts and bowels to their suffering. And it’s still a valuable exercise in these divisive political times, for us to know unequivocally with our hearts, minds, and guts the “if-then” of Christian discipleship. As I’ve said before, and fear I will be called by the Spirit to say again, we are living in times when many of the powers-that-be are following ways that are so contrary to the ways of Christ that we cannot assume allegiance to one is allegiance to the other. We must be clear in our hearts whose way we love most, and given how many of our brothers and sisters are in great need, we also must think about how best we can care for our God-given family as Christ calls us to do, even if our government does not recognize the same moral obligation.

After we have all recovered from the book sale next weekend, I am going to be organizing a task force to begin to explore how we want to answer that call as a congregation. Our STAIR tutoring program is going strong, as are our ministries to Sarah’s House, Habitat for Humanity, the Crofton Christian Caring Council, and the Light House Shelter. We are beginning to do more to be an Earth Care congregation as well. But five years ago, we contemplated doing three new ministries of which STAIR was one. The other two, Neighborhood Connections and the Touch a Truck family ministry, have run their course. That means we have an opportunity to reach out in a new way to make a difference to some of God’s sheep. Many of the other churches in our regional cluster Bay Area Disciples, do so by sponsoring refugee families that were able to get into the United States before we began closing our doors. We may want to do that too. Or, we may want to develop a ministry to seniors and shut-ins, or some other constituency. We will have to pray for the Spirit to help us discern whom God wants us to help next. But you do not need to

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<sup>4</sup> Hiebert, D. Edmond, “*An Exposition of 1 John 3:13-24*,” BIBLIOTHECA SACRA, July-Sept. 1989, 308.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Ivory, Luther D., *The Rhythm of Discipleship* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2008), 60.

be an ordained officer or member of this church to join in the conversation about our next mission. So, watch for a sign up in the next few weeks or email or text me if you are interested.

We are blessed to have “the world’s goods” compared to millions of people, and to live in peace and security with plenty of food and opportunity. This means we are also blessed to be able to help, and it is one way we tell the Jesus once, twice, three times, and more, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you.” May the risen Christ help us to look at those around us and in the news with new eyes, so instead of saying, “What are they to me?” or “Am I their keeper?” with resentment, jealousy, indifference, or fear, our hearts, hands, and voices will say, “What are they to me? They are family, my God-given responsibility. And I am here to help.” Amen.