

Easter 4A John 10:1-10  
May 7, 2017  
Grace Lutheran Church

The family and I went to dinner with friends recently,  
And when we returned, our dog Sophie greeted us  
With her normal, "You've been gone for forever...  
I'm so glad you're back!" welcome.

When I got upstairs to take of my shoes,  
I noticed that she had gotten into the upstairs trash,  
And completely demolished a thrown away used diaper.  
Bits and pieces were scattered around the floor.

Now, those of you without dogs will grimace at the thought  
Of what I was standing in front of in my bathroom,  
Wondering why on earth I would talk about such a thing  
From a pulpit in a church on a Sunday morning.

Those of you with dogs,  
Are shaking your heads knowingly.

I whipped around to where Sophie was politely sitting  
Waiting for continued pats and belly rubs after our arrival,  
And I pointed to the floor and declared  
The worst possible reality any dog could face:  
"You're a bad dog, Sophie, bad girl."

Her countenance fell immediately.

It was like a ton of bricks had come from the sky  
And pressed her head and body so close to the ground  
That the carpet and floor joists strained to support her.

She looked at me with pitiful eyes  
That begged for some kind of reconciliation between us.  
She acted like her world was falling apart at the seams.

It was not a pleasant clean-up effort.  
But after I cooled off I started thinking about  
The interesting balance between  
Our use of the words "good" and "bad".

Just earlier in the day I praised Sophie for going outside

And running off some energy.  
She was a “good girl” when we came back in  
At my command.

She’s good when she does what we want,  
And bad when she does what we don’t like.

When she drops the ball, retrieves it, and brings it back: good!  
When she destroys a discarded diaper: bad.

When she licks Owen’s face  
Until he can’t breathe because of laughter: good!  
When she gets a little too rough and starts nipping: bad.

Good girl. Bad girl.  
We like your behavior, we don’t like your behavior.

With children and teenagers:  
Good decision, bad decision.

With business proposals and draft picks:  
Good idea, bad idea.

It’s very clearly one or the other, isn’t it?  
Anything in the middle has to tip one direction or the other.  
A simple dualistic judgment of the world around us

Good and bad is certainly easy.  
It’s an easy way to categorize the world around us,  
To filter what is important  
And what should be ignored.

We crave the simple line that divides some from others.  
And that line is drawn everywhere we turn:  
Democrat-Republican, gay-straight, black-white,  
pro-Israel-pro-Palestine, pro-choice-pro-life.

Simple labels like good and bad make the world a simpler place.  
Simple and quick labels take less dialogue, less effort,  
Less thinking...and frankly...  
Less love.

It’s hard to love fully when even simple labels like good and bad  
Are used to divide.

It's hard to love fully when we spend even an ounce of energy  
Separating the bad people we don't like,  
From the good ones we do.

It's hard to love fully when we shun the bad,  
And only embrace the good.

So we have to think carefully about what it means  
When we identify and cling to him as the Good Shepherd.

Is he good based on our standards?  
Our own limited and nearsighted and simplistic  
View of what's good and what's bad?

Is Jesus good because we like his behavior?

Does it mean he is "good" as set apart  
From other "bad" shepherds?  
Possibly referring to the Pharisees  
And other religious and political opponents?

Is he the good shepherd compared  
To the "bad" hired hands out there,  
Who try to steal and scatter and destroy and kill?

Is Jesus the good shepherd simply because...well...  
He's just not bad?

Or is Jesus the Good Shepherd for another reason?

Does the Shepherd's goodness come not from  
Our own understandings or reasoning or personal likes,  
But because of who and what he claims to be and do.

Perhaps he's the Good Shepherd  
because he's the source of abundant life.

Perhaps because he's the Lord of Psalm 23  
Who leads beside still waters and restores souls.

Perhaps because he restores sight to a blind man,  
Then goes out of his way to find him once the religious leaders

Had thrown him out of the temple for blasphemy.  
Perhaps because he calls his people by name and truly knows them,  
Lazarus in his grave and Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb.

Perhaps because he lays down his life in the Garden of Gethsemene  
So that his disciples remain safe from the oncoming mob.

Perhaps Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he takes up his life again  
In the resurrection and the ascension,  
Fulfilling the promise of new life now,  
And preparing our eternal abiding place forever.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd  
Because he loves his flock.

He knows the flock, he cares for his flock,  
He seeks and he finds those astray from the flock.

He lays down his own life for the flock  
So that they will dwell in the house of the Lord  
Their whole life long.

The Shepherd is not good...because he's not bad,  
The Shepherd is good...because he is God.

The Good Shepherd is good because he makes and fulfills  
Promises through water and word in Baptism.

The Good Shepherd is good because he sets a table before us,  
The meal we share together at this altar,  
Gifts of life, peace, forgiveness, goodness and mercy,

The Good Shepherd is good because he creates  
Freedom from labels that divide people and nations,  
Freedom from the very sting of death itself,

This is what Good Shepherd does.  
This is who the Good Shepherd is.  
This is why the Good Shepherd...is so...  
So incredibly good.

And because the Good Shepherd is who the Good Shepherd is,  
We are set apart to be the sheep of his fold...  
Unafraid to live in the same abundance  
Modeled for us.

Specifically today that means making commitments to support  
The work of this place through generous giving of dollars.

It means trusting that our gifts are stewarded and shepherded  
To go and make a difference for those  
Who perhaps don't quite know  
The goodness and mercy of the Good Shepherd.

Today and every day we choose to live our lives  
From an attitude of abundance, not scarcity.

And we can do this  
Because the Good Shepherd is so good, all the time.

Amen.