

Easter 4B John 10:11-18
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 off 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.

But you don't have to have a pet to know what I'm talking about. 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 – or 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 Gethsemane 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 Good 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.