

"Permission Giving: Risk Taking"

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 26, 2015
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Psalm 23; John 10: 11-18

Theme: Love always demands the highest level of sacrifice. Through the model and message as our Good Shepherd, Jesus of Nazareth gives us permission to make sacrifices and take risks for a loving, holy divine purpose.

John 10:11-18 (NRSV)

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Psalm 23 (KJV)

*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

*He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

“Here I Am, Lord” [1]

(Soloist: Ashley Buchannon, Junior at Agnes Scott College)

*Here I am Lord, Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go Lord, if You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.*

Last week Atlanta was blessed with eight straight days of rain. Best guess is they were an early Earth Day gift from Mother Nature.

Our church playground is fairly adept at soaking in excess rainwater.

Circa 2002 an Eagle Scout made it his project to install French drains,

hidden drains that have stood the tests of time and tiny footprints.

However, eight consecutive torrential rain showers made the park a soggy mess,
with puddles and mud in abundance.

A week ago Saturday, 17-year-old Kevin Beck and his family and I were in the park

to install the Free Lending Library

that Kevin built with his grandfather, Henry Butler.

Kevin designed and built the Free Lending Library

to physically and spiritually reflect the sanctuary of First Christian Church:

the see-through door opens wide to welcome learners and learning,

and it offers easy access to the whole people of God.

You see, last December Kevin and some of his Decatur High School classmates

were helping with our Christmas Tree Sale.

After he and I tied a Fraser Fir tree on a neighbor's car,

I asked about his high school senior project.

He said he wanted to build a Free Lending Library.

"Do you have a site picked out?"

"Not yet," he said.

I could barely contain my excitement.

"How about building a library for children right here in our playground?"

We have always wanted one."

He shrugged and said, *"Okay."*

Four, five months later there we were,

putting a dream into red Georgia clay with Quikrete and a prayer.

Red Georgian mud, actually, with the ground being so soggy.

Twenty yards from us sat a full grown man in said mud.

He was around 50 years old, in dress shirt, slacks and loafers, and

happy as a clam.

You see, he was sitting in the mud with a little two-year-old boy.
When asked he beamed and said, "*This is my grandson!*"

No other words were necessary; his love shown on his face and demeanor.

His grandson guided a toy truck through the red clay
and then over his grandfather's shins,
leaving a muddy trail.

Grandpa could not have been any happier.

In that moment of bliss he was not thinking
about the conditions or cleaning bills or whether his
backside was soaking wet;
he was focused on this love of his life.

The sacrifice of some comfort or laundry soap was nothing, naught
in comparison with the relationship.

In the eyes of the world, in common sense, for all practical
purposes

the pyramid of power and principalities and prestige
is turned upside down.

Jesus calls his people to a life

not built on gaining power and prestige in the name of self
but a life of making sacrifices and serving in the
name of love.

A grandfather sacrifices his ego and sits in the mud alongside a
child

and they laugh and love and live in the moment.

He beams and says, "*This is my grandson!*"

God sent to earth a Good Shepherd to guide and guard and give
himself for his sheep,

to sit in the mud and muck, from the manger to this
moment,

and together we laugh and love and live in Him.

God beams and says, "*These are my
people!*"

A high school student sacrifices his play time and sports time and

me time

to build a gift for the next generation,
giving sacrificially of his resources and energy and
gifts,

taking a risk for neighbors whose names he
doesn't know (yet)

and (yet) whose need he recognizes.

The Son of God sacrifices himself,

laying down his life and taking the ultimate risk,
all in the name of Love.

Jesus said, *"I lay down my life in order to take it up again.*

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

Love demands the highest level of sacrifice.

Turning the pyramid of power upside down,

the Good Shepherd tells us He lays down for the sheep.

Turning our expectations upside down,

the Good Shepherd reminds us that He gives up vainglory
for the sake of his flock.

The Good Shepherd commands his followers, saying, *"Love one
another."*

"Love one another."

Love is expressed in sacrifice, in giving oneself away.

"For God sent the Son into the world,

not to condemn the world,

but that the world might be saved through him."

Love's sacrifice is offered unconditionally, for the sake of
redemption.

As soon as we put conditions on our love,

then selfishness creeps in and love slowly fades away.

Sacrificial love requires, neigh, demands risk.

Consider the 23rd Psalm.

King David the Psalmist prays,

*“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me...”*

We observe that the Good Shepherd does not remove the valley of the shadow of death;

nor does the Shepherd assert we can avoid the valley of the shadow of death.

Rather the Shepherd promises to be with us as we walk through the valley shadows.

Each time we take a risk, knowingly, faithfully, courageously walking through the valley,

we shall not fear and we shall not move forward in vain
because the Good Shepherd is with us,
God Incarnate giving meaning and hope.

The Good Shepherd’s rod and staff protect us;

they comfort us, they guide and guard us through the valley and through life.

You've probably heard about the child who came home from Sunday school crying

and saying that he was never going back.

His parents were concerned and kept asking what was wrong.

Finally he said, *“I don't want that lady chasing me.*

My Sunday school teacher said that some lady will chase me the rest of my life!”

Well, his folks were totally confused and continued to question him.

Finally the boy calmed down enough to explain, *“My teacher said, ‘Good Mrs. Murphy was going to follow me all the days of my life.’*

*If Good Mrs. Murphy is going to follow me everywhere I go,
then I'm not going back!”*

We do hope he comes back again, soon.

The goodness and mercy of the Good Shepherd is with you,

always.

Not to sit alone or sit at home or sit and stare at a screen;
rather to live faithfully, fully engaged, enriched and
invigorated.

As Albert Einstein said,
*“A ship is always safe at the shore.
But that is not what it’s built for.”*

God gives humanity permission and empowers us
to take bold and meaningful risks for the sake of love,
to courageously step out on faith.

William Barclay interpreted the Scriptures this way:
*“Love always involves responsibility, and love always involves
sacrifice.*

*And we do not really love Christ
unless we are prepared to face His task and to take up His
Cross.”*

My experience of Christians taking up the Cross of Jesus
is we expect that after emerging dripping wet from the
baptistery
or departing fed and sustained from the Lord’s
Table
that God will send us out to assume some
marvelous responsibility
or to tackle a magnificent, holy task.

My observations over these years and tears, miles and smiles is
that for the most part
followers of Jesus will be commanded to love the ones we
are with...
we will be sent forth to discern how to agree to
disagree...
we will be required to sacrifice our egos and desperate need
to be in control...
we will be inspired to risk our reputations by

practicing dissent...

we will be invited to become the love of
God incarnate...

So be forewarned! As G. K. Chesterton observed,
*“The Bible tells us to love our neighbors,
and also to love our enemies:
probably because they are generally the same people.”*

Be careful when you sing or hum or pray, *“Here I am, Lord.”*
God will respond and may command you to love, to live
sacrificially,
to take a risk by loving an enemy, or forgiving a sin,
or washing someone’s feet, standing up against
injustice,
becoming a maker of peace, or sitting in the
mud with a child.

In January our congregation welcomed home a new partner in
ministry.

We are nesting a ministry called L’Arche.

When you see Tim Moore and his staff around, welcome them
home.

L’Arche is an International Federation with homes in 60 nations.
It is dedicated to the creation and growth of homes, programs,
and support networks with people who have intellectual
disabilities.

Jean Vanier is the founder of L’Arche.

This ministry emphatically turns the pyramid of power on its head.

In his book Community and Growth, Jean Vanier said
*“The response to war is to live like brothers and sisters.
The response to injustice is to share.
The response to despair is a limitless trust and hope.
The response to prejudice and hatred is forgiveness.”*

*To work for community is to work for humanity.
To work for peace is to work for a true political solution;
it is to work for the Kingdom of God.
It is to work to enable everyone to live and taste the secret joys
of the human person united to the eternal.”*

Recently L’Arche’s Tim Moore asked us, his neighbors in this fair city, a question:

*Friends, when was the last time you took a risk?
Certainly it was a risky leap of faith in 2012
when L’Arche Atlanta opened its doors
as a community of people with and without intellectual disabilities,
living and sharing life together as a family.
At L’Arche Atlanta, we remind ourselves of what it’s like to feel
vulnerable
in the Easter ritual of foot washing.
Letting someone else touch your feet can be a pretty uncomfortable
experience...
...in foot washing, we practice what Jean Vanier...describes as
sacred touch,
a touch of “deep respect, with deep affection;
a touch which reveals that you are precious and that you are a
part of me.”*

*It’s a ritual that affirms the community that we realize
when we enter into relationships of mutuality and care.
The loving support of people like you
makes it possible for adults with intellectual disabilities
to live in shared community.”*

Tim added his gratitude for our ongoing engagement
in our shared “...conviction that all people – with and
without disabilities –
are worthy of love and belonging.” [\[2\]](#)

All people are worthy of love and belonging.

That doesn’t sound so risky, does it? Pretty bland, if you think about it.

And yet...what does it sound like when the Good Shepherd calls it out?

All people -- with or without disabilities...

All people -- with our without a church home or a place to even call home...

All people -- with our without resources...

All people -- with or without civil rights...

All people -- with or without advocates, apostles, or angels to watch over them...

All people who walk through the valley of the shadow of death...

All of God's people are worthy of love and belonging.

Praise God the Good Shepherd turns the pyramid of power upside down,

transforms dreams into realities,

transcends a commandment to love and puts some skin on it,

sinks it deep into the red clay of Georgia and lets it be,

Love Incarnate, made real to the world by those

who dare to say and pray, "*Here I am Lord. Is it I, Lord?*"

In response, in response the Good Shepherd sits with us

in the mud and muck, from the manger to this moment.

In Him we, too, become Love Incarnate,

with our sheepishness, brokenness and wholeness,

together with our amazing gifts and talents and risk-taking selves.

The Good Shepherd beams at the universe and says, "*These, these are my people!*"

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] James Kilbane - Here I Am Lord Lyrics | MetroLyrics

[2] Tim Moore, Executive Director, L'Arche Atlanta, Email April 20, 2015.