

This is April 25, 2021...It is the 4th Sunday of Easter

On behalf of our family of faith at Community United Church of Christ,
Medford, WI, welcome to this time of worship!

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey,
you are welcome here!”



Invocation: Let’s begin with a prayer. Jesus, you are our Good Shepherd. We shall never want. You make us lie down in green pastures; you lead us beside the still waters. You restore our souls. You guide us in the paths of righteousness for your name’s sake. Even though we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, for you comfort us.

You have prepared a table for us in the presence of our foes; you have anointed us with the oil of salvation; our cup runs over! Surely, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of our God forever and ever. Amen.

Passing of the Peace of Christ

Let’s turn to someone near us now or call someone on the phone later and say, “Peace be with you.”

Cindy K and Michael T will read the Scripture today:

This a reading from the gospel of John, chapter 10, verses 11 through 18, from “The Message” interpretation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson

Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary. A hired man is not a real shepherd. The sheep mean nothing to him. He sees a wolf come and runs for it, leaving the sheep to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf. He’s only in it for the money. The sheep don’t matter to him.

14-18 “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. In the same way, the Father knows me and I know the Father. I put the sheep before myself, sacrificing myself if necessary.

You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them, too. They’ll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one Shepherd. This is why the Father loves me: because I freely lay down my life. And so, I am free to take it up again. No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own free will. I have the right to lay it down; I also have the right to take it up again. I received this authority personally from my Father.”

~The Message, © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

Thank you, Michael and Cindy! **My Message today is entitled, Message: “All We, Like Sheep”**

Pray with me: Creator God, Spirit of Wisdom, Gentle Shepherd, we gather today because you have called us each by name. You have nudged us here and you welcome us as we are, into this unique gathering. We offer you our thanks and praise for the blessings of this day and this hour. Amen.

When we think of the many names in which we refer to Jesus, the “*Good Shepherd*” is the one that draws our attention today. It was not a nickname that one of the disciples gave him. He chose it for himself. “I am the Good Shepherd,” he says, as it is recorded in today’s scripture.

The verses of this “Good Shepherd” scripture passage that pop out at me every time I read it are these “heart” motivated, shepherding-in -the-sense-of-loving phrases: *My sheep know me. I need to gather in the other sheep, too, because they also know my voice. I put the sheep before myself.*

Think about sheep. What comes to mind? Loving them? (I didn’t think so.) Did you think of sheep as not being very smart? or blindly following one another? Now, think about shepherds. Have you ever been a shepherd, or would you say that you identify with the sheep? Remember that shepherds spend their time in the fields each day, feeding the sheep, giving them shelter, protecting them from danger.

Let's take a look at some of the people whose lives mark the history of Christianity: **Abraham**. He was the keeper of great flocks. **Moses**. He was out tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, when God called him (Exodus 3) "...to lead... the Israelites, out of Egypt." **David**. He was a shepherd boy called in from the fields to be the King of Israel. (2 Samuel 2) They each "left" their flocks to take on a different sort of "shepherding."

As a young shepherdess, Rachel met Jacob when she came to water her sheep (Genesis 29:9). Moses's wife, Zipporah, was one of seven daughters who tended their father's sheep (Exodus 2:16-21). Some scholars speculate that Rebekah and Leah were also shepherdesses. Besides pasturing the flocks, watering and watching them, tending minor injuries and sheltering them at night, a shepherdess also had the duty of spinning yarn during her hours in the field. (womenfromthebook.com) Multi-tasking is not new!

Isaiah prophesied the coming Messiah with these words: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs into his arms." (Isaiah 40:11-16)

Many years later, in First Century Palestine, with shepherding still a common occupation, it is no wonder that the image of the shepherd and the sheep was frequently on the lips of Jesus. He told a story about a shepherd who had 100 sheep. When one went astray, the shepherd left the 99 and went off in search of the *one*. In the Gospel of Mark 6:34, it is written that Jesus had compassion upon the people because they were "as sheep without a shepherd."

The words of John's gospel emphasize the shepherd's loving nature more than do they dwell on the practical methods of the shepherd's leadership. I can't help but think that Jesus, who, in his very nature, showed his disciples ways to be more loving, was thinking "You should know me by now!" But he found one more way to tell them how to love one another, by zeroing in on examples from their own everyday lives. Look, this is what a shepherd does. This is what you should do. ("Now, do you get it?")

Rev Cheryl Lindsay notes this: "The Good Shepherd embodies **love as a verb**, an action done by someone unto someone...The implication for Christian communities is to spread the good news by being the good news, loving our neighbors, honoring the full diversity of humanity...**This is** laying down one's life in the model of the Good Shepherd."

I like that...spreading the good news by being the good news and thus, embodying that love of the Shepherd. In perfect timing, during the program that was part of the NW Association Annual on Saturday morning, one of the speakers echoed the thought, "Love is a Verb." He said it this way: "Neighbor" is a verb.

How will we follow Jesus the "Good Shepherd" today? By doing what we are already doing, but by adding more loving and more neighboring.. "But," you say, "there are a variety of sheep in the pasture, some are going this way, some are veering off the other way." Remember that Jesus knows us each by name and loves and cares for us all just the same. It is time that we get that information into our heads and into our hearts.

Being like sheep has gotten bad press, but I say that being compared to a sheep is not a bad thing. Believing that God watches over us, that God loves us and that God cares about us should be a sustaining assurance.

Think about it. It's not easy to be loving and caring during times of unrest. Some will agree that our neighbors should have equal rights and equal opportunities; that strangers should be welcomed in just as extravagantly as visiting celebrities. Some will not. Some will consistently honor the beliefs, the hopes, the dreams and diversity of everyone. Some will not. Some will define health and safety differently. God watches over all, loves all and cares about all.

We each own a personal history. We each have talents and ideas. We each are able to tell personal stories, that some would call "baggage," about being the *lone sheep* or the *lost sheep* in the family. Each of us, covered in every ounce of our diversely woven wooly covering, with our innermost quirks and follies,

continues to wander in the pastures of our lives. We can't understand one another's passions or anticipate one another's needs if we do not know each other. We need to become acquainted with those outside of our tiny sheepfolds. We need to imagine ourselves "in their shoes" and remember that God watches over all, loves all and cares about all.

We have paused for this time of worship within the gates of our home-pens. Before we go out into the days of this week, hear or read these words of the Good Shepherd:

*** When there are times of distress and pain**, he speaks comfort:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... I do not give to you as the world gives." (John 14:27).

***When there are times that our faith falters and our vision grows dim**, he reassures us:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1).

***When there are times in which we are uncertain of our life's purpose**, he calls us anew:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

***When we are standing at the rim of death's canyon**, he speaks to us of hope:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live ..." (John 11:25).

***When we sit bewildered and can think of nothing to do**, Jesus asks us as he asked Peter:

(John 21:16) "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Simon replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you."

Jesus said to him, "Take care of my sheep."

Jesus, The Good Shepherd, came so that we will have real and eternal life... better life than we ever dreamed of. Jesus calls each of us to that better life, no matter who we are or where we are on our life's journey, by shepherding us to do our best to love God, to love our neighbor and to love ourselves.

He calls it, "Taking care of my sheep."

If you read today's scripture again, you are bound to find your thoughts traveling in many directions as it speaks directly to you. What is the Good Shepherd saying? What matters to us? How will we follow? Will we stay with the flock or separate ourselves? If the Shepherd cares for us, how then will we care for one another? How can we, *neighbor* and *love*? What if we open the gates and the sheep do not come back in?

Do you have any answers, or does something else stand out to you? Let's talk about these things.

I invite you to pop in for Sunday Coffee and fellowship on Zoom at 10am. The connection information is on Facebook page and in our weekly email.

And now, my friends, all we, like sheep, have an idea of what we need to do!

Solo: Pastor Mary Jo, "**Shepherd of My Heart**"

Maker of this heart of mine you know me very well.

You understand my deepest part more than I know myself.

So when I face the darkness, when I need to find my way, I'll trust in you, Shepherd of my heart.

Keeper of this heart of mine, your patience has no end.

You've loved me back into your arms, time and time again.

So if I start to wander like a lamb that's gone astray, I'll trust in you, Shepherd of my heart.

You're the beacon of my nights, you're the sunlight of my days.

I can rest within your arms, I can know your loving ways.

So let the cold winds blow and let the storms rage all around. I'll trust in you, Shepherd of my heart.

Giver of this life in me you're what I'm living for, for all my deepest gratitude you love me even more.

So as I walk through valleys listening for the Master's call, I'll trust in you, Shepherd of my heart.

You're the beacon of my nights, you're the sunlight of my days.
I can rest within Your arm, I can know your loving ways.
So as I walk through valleys listening for my Master's call, I'll trust in you, Shepherd of my heart.
I'll trust in You, Shepherd of my heart.

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Take a deep breath... and let it out

Time for Prayer: Let's spend a few moments in silent prayer.

Let us pray: Holy One of many names, we thank you for this opportunity to be in these many places today. You are our comfort when we are fearful and worn out. You bless us in our decision-making and you guide us in the words we speak to one another. Forgive us for not taking more seriously your nudges and for ignoring your still small voice inside that speaks of peace and calls us to love. Forgive us when we think that we know better than the shepherd and when *all we, like sheep*, still veer in our various ways.

We give you thanks for the wisdom of our elders and the fearlessness of the little ones. We give you thanks when love finds a way when there seems to be no way; when dreams and answers to prayers are within our reach. May we enjoy their release.

We pray, O God, for our families and our friends - and for all those whom you have placed upon our hearts this day, especially: Jackie H, Jim S, Kay, Sandy K, Susan S, Maggie M, Tom N, Phil G, Christine D, Cathy S, Angie, Shelly B, Mike G-P, Matt L. Bless, heal, and strengthen all who are recovering from surgery, those going through rehabilitation and those awaiting medical testing; those who are enwrapped in mental illness; those who are grieving the loss of loved ones, especially the Severt family in Merrill.

We lift our prayers for church leaders and congregations as they make decisions to do the *right things* to help keep one another safe; for leaders of nations that they might turn their attention to peace.

Hear now the prayers we hold in our hearts, as we ask for whatever may be best for us and pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Risen Savior. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

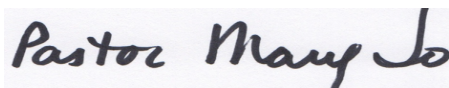
A Time of Intention and Thanks: Many thanks to all who, by your giving, have made possible the ministry of our church to continue. Let's dedicate our gifts given in person, through the mail and by electronic means.

Oh God of endings and new beginnings, we offer you our time, talents and treasures, knowing that you have more for us to do than we have yet imagined! Bless us and our gifts in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Benediction: Go now. Knowing that the Good Shepherd is with us as the grassy meadows green up, and is with us by still waters and is with us through the shadowy dark valleys of death and evil and injustice; knowing that the Good Shepherd claims all of us as his own and calls us each by name... then, **let our intent be this:** to love and care for each other however it is best for us.

This time together has ended, let our service begin now.

Peace be with you and be safe!



You will find this *recorded service* at uccmedford.org
Click on "media." 715-351-0450