

“Caring for the World...and for One Another”

A sermon delivered at St. Andrew’s United Church

by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman

April 26, 2015

Readings: Acts 4:5-12 John 10:11-18

It is always this way – Earth Day comes as we embark on the fourth week of April. It is followed by Camping Sunday in the United Church. Thinking about the earth, and then being open to the natural beauty and gifts of creation around us.

They go together, do they not?

But it is more than an attempt to mingle culture with theology, or make the Bible work in the modern times.

The biblical witness begins with the story of creation – a story meant not to be historical and factual, but even more importantly, to be filled with truth – religious, personal, communal, transforming truth.

You see, the story of creation may not be historical as we understand the word, but it is historic – it tells us clearly the meaning and purpose of creation and therefore how we should live as humans.

Every section of that story, at the end of every day of the creation process, God says “and it was good.” In a world of cynicism, negativity, disappointment, frustration, would not it be a gift to see what is around us and say “it is good”?

In that context we come to the gospel of John, and the imagery of the good shepherd, a term used by Jesus, and later applied to Jesus by the church. The good shepherd has two main qualities: he will give up his life for the benefit of the sheep flock, and he knows the sheep personally and understands their every need.

The story is more than a story about sheep and a shepherd. It serves as a way of speaking about the essence of what we expect in life from people concerned for us, who care for us, and who support us.

How many of us have even one person who is willing to die for us if that is the choice, or who understand us completely and fully?

Knowing many of you here today and the connections and friends and family trees that sustain you, there are several people, for sure, that would fall into both categories – having people who would die for you if it came to that, and who know you completely – but even the luckiest of us would measure those number of people in terms of dozens – two or three dozen if very fortunate – not in hundreds or thousands.

The attraction of Jesus for those in his time, and in all time, is the fact what he said and how he lived has an impact on our lives, and how we understand the ways that we should live even today.

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins studied Fortune 500 companies that were good companies, but over time had transformed themselves into great companies. Collins' book was a big hit in the organizational and business world a decade or more ago.

Collins said that what was significant in such good companies was the fact that they understood the relationship between core values and business practices. These companies knew what they were about, and acted in ways that underlined for all to see who they were and what they were about.

Collins identified those companies that had moved from “good” to “great” as companies who enjoyed outstanding management and visionary leadership, what he termed “level 5” leadership. These were companies who had leaders who were first and foremost there for the cause, the organization, the work that needed to be done, and not for themselves, and they have the fierce resolve to do whatever it takes to fulfill that ambition. They have personal humility (it is not all about them) and yet a drive to succeed (the company comes first).

Listen people -- you could have spent more time reading John’s gospel and saved the \$30 on Collins book. For Jesus in his rendering of the good shepherd also speaks about commitment beyond one’s self, and an ability to work with others in a way that “the other” is understood and affirmed.

Today we have been lucky to hear directly from youth involved in church camping – from our congregation (Connor Ross, a Counsellor in Training at Camp Lorrain), and from the wider church (Veronica Stover, a counsellor at Lambton United Church Centre).

But in many church camps, from directors to cooks to swimming instructors to craft organizers to chaplains, we have people seeking to share their level 5 leadership skills – concerned for the children of the camp, and ready to understand and connect with those with

whom they share a week in a cabin, and a mutual experience of nature.

We gladly and easily see Jesus as the good shepherd. It is a high standard of service and commitment. Yet we, too, as followers of Jesus are called to live up to a different standard in our own lives. So let us be open to the good shepherds among us of all ages, who do what they do not for monetary success or personal glory, but for an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others.

We are fortunate that many young people see their calling to serve our children and youth in church camping. Yes, counsellors are paid, but believe me, they do not do it for the money. Their small salary belies their true commitment and dedication to what they do, an indication of their calling to encourage young people and make a difference in their lives.

We need to care for the earth and all in it – we also need to care for one another. Camping for some is a way to do all of that.

And no doubt God said “it is good.”