

Being Easter People – Care
John 10:11-18
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
April 25, 2021
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

I want to invite you to close your eyes. Settle into your chair. Sit comfortably. Slow your breath.

Now picture the place you feel most cared for. Where are you? Who is with you? How does it feel?

Is this a place you can go whenever you need to feel cared for? Is this a memory that you return to when life is hard? Is what you envision about the place...about the people...about the feeling?

Sit with that feeling for just a moment more. Can you hold onto it as you open your eyes?

What is it about feeling cared for that matters so much?

In an article in *Psychology Today*, Rick Hanson writes, “Studies show that feeling cared about buffers against stress, increases positive emotions, promotes resilience, and increases caring for others. Plus it feels darn good” ([Is Feeling Cared About Important? | Psychology Today](#)).

And so it matters that in our scripture text we see images like the one Julie read for us today. It matters that we come to know Jesus as one who cares for us. It matters that we come to know Jesus as one who is invested in us...who enters intimate relationship with us...who leads us to safety and through struggle...who will even lay down his life for us because of the value he places on us.

These things matter on so many levels. As we heard earlier, psychology tells us we are mentally and emotionally healthier when we know what it is to be cared for, when we have resources of care, especially in the times of trouble. And our medical doctors will agree - our physical health is better when we are cared for, when we feel secure and valued.

Not only that, but spiritually we are better off when the God we understand is a God of care and concern rather than a God of threat and control. After all, for we who are people of faith, so much of how we experience and interact this world is connected to our perception of God.

Have you ever noticed that faith communities that focus on God as one who is about punishing people for sin and for whom everything is set up in black and white binaries of

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right and wrong, often those faith communities reflect that in their own structures of leadership and membership. Often there you are likely to find leaders who are not to be challenged and members scared of being damned to hell or excommunicated from the church.

And yet, this picture of Jesus tells a different story. This picture of Jesus tells of one whose interest and care lies in all people - even those, to quote John, who “do not belong to this fold.” This picture of Jesus tells of one who cares so much for the sheep that he is willing to risk death in leading them and protecting them. And remember - what we know about sheep is that they won’t be herded from behind, but they follow the one who goes first...who leads them. This picture of Jesus tells of one who leads the sheep into places of abundance, one who is in deeply-personal relationship with each and every one who follows.

And remember, this picture isn’t just about Jesus, but also about God. As people who understand Jesus to be the human who most clearly reflects God, we know that what Jesus does is not a shift from who God is but is a reminder of it. In fact, what is the most well-known psalm? Psalm 23, and it begins “The Lord is my shepherd...” and is likely so loved because we know deep within ourselves that being cared for matters.

So these images, which touch us deep inside ourselves, remind us that our God is a god of love and care.

But not only that. These aren’t just words about the divine. This isn’t just a parable telling us about Jesus. Because, friends, if we are followers of Jesus, if we are people who love God, then we are invited to live as reflections of them as well. We are invited to work alongside them to create the world as it is intended, and these images remind us that the world is intended to be a place of care for all creation.

As Sarah S. Henrich, Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Luther Seminary, wrote in *Feasting on the Word*, “Most important, of course, is Jesus’ identification as a *kalos* shepherd. This [Greek] word, most often translated ‘good,’ is frequently understood by Americans as the opposite of ‘bad.’ While not inaccurate, *kalos* means ‘good’ more in the sense of model. Jesus is the good shepherd insofar as he is a model shepherd...” (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, 451).

When I hear this I am reminded that a model is one we are called to not only observe, but to imitate, one after whom we are to pattern our own lives.

If Jesus is the model for us about what living from the heart of God looks like, then we are to live in ways that show the same care to others that we receive from God.

And, friends, our world is in need of care.

We try to solve problems by demanding our own way rather than listening and learning...then we wonder why it doesn't work, we wonder why conflicts continue, we wonder why people don't feel like they matter.

We shoot first and ask questions later...offering "thoughts and prayers" rather than changing our systems and policies. We quickly celebrate a verdict without acknowledging that in lives of many it changes nothing.

We place different value on different people with too many systems that have higher regard for adults than for children, for men than for women, for people who are straight rather than those who identify as LGBTQ, for people who are white over those who are black, indigenous and people of color.

As long as people of color are questioned - or worse - for walking in their own neighborhoods...as long as young people courageous enough to put a name to their identity are denied medical treatment...as long as being poor means choosing between food and electricity, secure housing and medical care...as long as our earth groans under the strain of the ways we use and abuse it...as long as we remain suspicious of anyone who is different from us...as long as we hold fast to borders and boundaries drawn on a map rather than opening up our hearts...as long as there are children who grow up not knowing love...as long as these remain true, then our world is not a world of care and we have a responsibility not just to live in our pockets of care, but to create this for everyone.

Friends, I wonder what our world would like if every person had experiences of care like those painted in today's scripture. What if everyone knew what it was to feel valued, to be cared for, to be loved? What if everyone knew what it was to have someone, not who would take their life in a momentary reaction, but who would lay down his or her own life for them? What if everyone had someone leading them toward abundance and staying with them through the difficult times?

It is easy for people like me to just relax into this image of Jesus and be comfortable with it. After all, I have had the privilege of knowing what it is to be loved and cared for - that has been my entire life. Maybe yours as well.

But I don't just get to settle in there. Rather as a follower of Jesus, as an Easter person living the reality of this thing we call resurrection, I have a responsibility to show that same care, not just to the people in my inner circle, but to the world. I have the responsibility to show care to those I know and those I don't...to those like me and those very different from me...to the very earth on which I live.

On her blog, Julie E. Richardson wrote about a young man named Adam who died at 33 years of age in the Georgia state prison system. He was someone she had known throughout his life. At one point Julie writes this, "If I was born into life ahead of the starting line in terms of advantage—and I was—Adam was born several lengths behind it. He had every socioeconomic, familial, educational and emotional block you can think of

in his way, not to mention that sometimes being biracial in the Deep South means not ever really knowing where you belong. And while none of these things excuse him from responsibility for his actions, they do give such actions context. Every single system failed Adam. From the very beginning, he deserved so much more”

(<https://someonestolemycoffee.com/2021/04/18/measuring-a-life/?fbclid=IwAR2JnE8nWvbpBMvtE9bZaxRxDxWpdoR3qee9qlz11h5EHP213CSGHxbDL90>).

Julie ends her remembrance of Adam writing, “*Please rest in peace now, dear Adam. I have no doubt the angels carried you safely home, and into the arms of God, who loved you from the very beginning, far more than any of us ever could*”

(<https://someonestolemycoffee.com/2021/04/18/measuring-a-life/?fbclid=IwAR2JnE8nWvbpBMvtE9bZaxRxDxWpdoR3qee9qlz11h5EHP213CSGHxbDL90>).

Friends, I believe what Julie wrote...that God received Adam just as God receives each one. But we cannot be content...that is not enough.

As those who follow the model shepherd, we must do everything in our power to create a world of care. We must do everything in our power to make an abundance of love a reality for all people in this life rather than just in the next. We must do everything in our power to let people know that they never go alone.

If we are privileged enough to be cared for, then it is our calling to show that same care to others, even to risk ourselves for the good of another, and in doing so to shine God’s love into this world. May it be so.