

I believe we carry within us the God-given goodness and ability to be people who love, who care, and who tend to the needs of others. Like a shepherd with their sheep, God's love for us is not distant nor impersonal, rather it's birthed in the everyday intimacy of relationship.

"Just as the Father knows me, I know the Father", Jesus says. So too, are we known and loved by God. We and God are as intertwined as the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Spirit: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; or as the New Zealand Prayer Book says, "Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-Giver. Inside of this mysterious, mutual knowing we not only find ourselves, but we find the freedom to love others as God loves us. To be Good Shepherds — to extend ourselves to others with the intention of truly knowing them and thus, being known by them.

Sometimes, this can feel a little risky — the being known part, that is. What if in allowing ourselves to be seen and known, others discover something about us we would rather keep hidden away? They might see that we are imperfect, flawed, limited, and sure to disappoint. It can be intimidating and scary to be seen; to truly be known. We may worry that if others see the truth of who we "really" are, they'll judge us, or worse, reject us. That alone is enough to keep us wearing masks of protection — revealing just enough of ourselves to be seen and included, but never so much that we risk being cast out.

But what if to be truly known, to be really seen, just as we are with no filters, no pretenses, no need to tread lightly around others lest we be deemed "too much", was the most significant gift we could give to one another, or to ourselves? What if being known intimately fostered within us not a fear of being exposed, but a fearlessness that arises out of being intimately known and loved for who we are?

In the musical *Les Miserable*, the main character, Jean Valjean, has been unjustly convicted for stealing a piece of bread to feed his sister's child. After escaping prison, he meets and becomes known to a Bishop who sees him through compassionate eyes, and who bestows upon him forgiveness and grace. It is this unexpected encounter that will inspire Jean Valjean to commit his life to the sacrificial care of the orphan Cosette, and of many others.

Likewise, through the experience of being seen and known intimately, we are better equipped to see the humanity in others and to cultivate genuine relationships based on mutual respect and compassion.

Under the watchful eye of the Good Shepherd, it is impossible to wander from God's love. The psalmist assures us that if we should lose our way, God will always find us. If we find ourselves in need, God will tend to and provide for us. In the face of danger, or threat, God promises to protect and defend us. We are God's people, and the sheep of his pasture. And Jesus assures us that we may trust in God's love and care for us — care that arises out of the deepest, most profound, most sacrificial love possible.

So, how does being known and loved by God help us to navigate our lives? Does it give you comfort? We may become consumed in self-criticism and somehow convince ourselves that if God really knew us, really saw the truth of who we are, that God wouldn't really love and accept us. And so, we hide out. We hold back from sharing ourselves fully, not only with God, but with one another.

What stops us from accepting the truth of God's love for us that Jesus proclaims: That it is unconditional and all encompassing and allows room for all that we are and are not, nor may ever be; Could we try to accept and believe that it is when we allow ourselves to be known and seen by our God that we are made whole? With God, in Jesus, there is no need for facades, pretenses, or energy to be spent trying to be or look like someone we are not, a person we imagine might be more acceptable. Rather, we find there, deep contentment and freedom— and permission to simply be ourselves. Jesus the good shepherd embraces all of us, calling us into the fold- a place by its nature, of belonging. We are not in it alone. We've not only got God — we've got each other. We must remember that we live not in isolation but are part of a collaborative- members of the flock, part of the fold. Yes, like sheep, we may from time to time stray, get off track and find ourselves isolated and in need of protection or saving. We may need help finding our way back, to be rescued from the depths of isolation and loneliness and restored to a place where we are no longer alone, where we are safe.

Under the care and protection of the Good Shepherd, we, God's beloved, become emboldened to extend the same care, inclusion and love to one another. Jesus seems to understand that human beings need not only to believe in God, but that we need reassurance of the creator's love for us. And so, using metaphors as he so often did to make his message more accessible, Jesus refers to himself not as an itinerant, radical preacher vested in shaking up the status quo as he calls upon people to seriously embrace and live out their faith as God made them to, but he refers to himself as Shepherd. The one called to care for the sheep. The one whose purpose and intent is to protect and guide, care for and accompany the flock. The one who lays down his life freely, and then takes it up again.

The Good Shepherd came into the world so that we might have life, and life abundant. And I believe, we all are called to shepherd one another. What if we were to take

Easter IV - Christ the Good Shepherd Sunday
John 10:11-18, Psalm 23

The Rev. Laurel Coote
Called to tend the flock.

seriously this call to be Good Shepherds? The Rev. Dr. Alice McKenzie writes, “We are not all called to dramatic situations in which our physical lives are on the line, like Christ’s was, but to the less dramatic, daily sacrifice involved in allowing the Good Shepherd to guide our lives, and the ways in which we offer guidance and nurture those we encounter every day.

Can you imagine? No agenda, no requirements, no pretending — only space for each of us to be known and seen, and celebrated, for who we truly are. In creating room for others to find themselves, we would find ourselves again, and then live into the fullness of who God created us to be — participants in God’s healing work in the world.