

4 Easter 2003
"Knowing the Father"
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Ah, the sheep and the shepherd! It's one of the oldest and most revered images in the Bible to describe the relationship between God and his people. "The Lord is my Shepherd." It dates all the way back to the shepherd-king David, 3000 years ago. David saw his relationship with God through the lens of his experience as a shepherd. God cares for his people as a shepherd for the sheep.

Jesus uses the same image in our Gospel lesson this morning, but he makes a very significant change in the story. He names HIMSELF as the Shepherd. That's really an astounding claim. He equates his presence and ministry among his people with God's presence and ministry.

And still the image of the sheep and shepherd reaches out to us today, in a very different time and place. **For us maybe the image is a little diluted.** Most of us don't have a lot of exposure to sheep, other than at petting zoos or when people bring them to church.

They seem cute, harmless little creatures. But as educated, modern, self-reliant adults, we may have difficulty really seeing ourselves AS sheep. We just don't think of ourselves that way.

So let's turn to that image briefly and see what we can see in it. I guess we can see **there's protection in the relationship between the Shepherd and sheep.** That's what sheep need because they're not very smart or well armed. Without a Shepherd they are at the mercy of the wolves.

Protection is good. And if we're honest we'll admit that WE need it, too. Living without a shepherd, autonomous, self-reliant, and fending for ourselves makes us anxious, controlling, apathetic, greedy, angry, defensive and demoralized. It makes us weird. It makes us jerks! We miss out on "the peace of God that passes understanding...and blessing of God Almighty" when we don't trust God for Shepherdly provision, protection and guidance.

There is also a degree of intimacy in the Shepherd/sheep relationship. The shepherd knows the names of the sheep and the sheep know the voice of the shepherd. The shepherd probably thinks the sheep are cute and the sheep probably have a sort of sheepish affection for their kind shepherd.

But Jesus talks about a much deeper sense of intimacy here that goes way beyond the shepherd/sheep metaphor. Jesus says, "I KNOW my own and my own KNOW me..." To describe that deep intimacy Jesus uses a very different image. "I know my own and my own know me, JUST AS the Father knows me and I know the Father."

He shifts from the Shepherd/sheep relationship to the Father/Son and he's talking about KNOWING each other. **To know one another...that's really the essence of relationship**, isn't it? It's knowing the other, discovering the other and allowing them to discover you. The deeper you know someone the deeper your relationship is with them.

Think of love as the quest to *know* someone better, to be more deeply and intimately acquainted and associated. And as you know the person you accept them and give yourself to them so they may know you better. This begins a cycle of intimacy that draws lovers closer and closer in mutual discovery, mutual self-revelation and mutual acceptance. **Loving and knowing are synonymous.**

This is the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. It's eternal, inexhaustible, ever-deepening. And Jesus is telling us that we enter into it with them. "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father."

Our epistle this morning amplifies and applies Jesus' teaching. John is writing to a group of Christians late in the 1st century and he wants them to grasp this kind of knowledge and love, this kind of relationship with God.

It's relevant to these Christians because **they're struggling with Gnosticism**. The name comes from the Greek word for 'knowledge'. Think of it as a religion called "Knowledge-ism". By the name you can guess what they are into. Gnostics elevate **knowledge in the place of faith**. They offer secret, mystical doctrines, into which people were initiated, freeing them from bondage to the material world, to embrace "spiritual" knowledge of the "higher" plane of reality.

Gnosticism has several points of similarity to Christianity, which made it easy for Gnostic ideas to seep into Christian consciousness and teaching. It gained considerable influence in the Church and John writes to counteract that influence.

John reminds his people of a very different kind of knowledge. It's not secret doctrines, esoteric rituals and mystical knowledge of the "higher" truths. It's the knowledge of God that Jesus taught. It's relational knowledge, the knowledge of love in the Father/child relationship.

John reminds them of it. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are...Beloved we are God's children now..."

John is trying to refocus them from Gnostic speculation to **a very simple core truth: You are loved**. God loves you as a child. This is the intense love, the ardent affection of the Father. "See what LOVE the Father has given us!" We all need reminding of this because this love is the fundamental need of our lives.

John describes three ways this knowledge, this love, this relationship with God impacts our lives. **First, this love gives us an identity and a future.** We are children of God. That's our identity with ALL that it implies. Like princes and princesses, we are heirs of the King.

Our relationship with God determines our destiny. We know that when Jesus is revealed, "we will be like him for we shall see him as he is." Our destiny is to grow into perfect knowledge of God, perfect relationship with God, and therefore perfect transformation into the likeness of God.

Next John describes how **this love inspires us to be like God.** To be a child of God is to imitate him, just as my sons George and Henry imitate and want to be like me. George says, "Someday I'll be a big man like you, daddy!" The child of God feels the same way. To know God and love God is to desire to be like God.

But you know, it's hard, isn't it? We keep falling short, failing, flailing, fearing and straying. We are sinful and dark and selfish and this alienates us from God. Therefore, **to be like God we must deal with this sin.** John says, "All who have this hope, PURIFY themselves just as he is pure."

And this brings us to the third impact of our knowledge, love and relationship with God. We can purify ourselves because **his love breaks the power of sin in our lives.** John says, "He was revealed to take away sins..." Jesus, because he died on the cross and rose from the grave, is victorious over sin and he is at work in our lives to make us victorious, too. That's how we can be pure, as he is pure.

That's his goal. He wants us to be like him. And to experience this victory, we must throw in our lot with him. We adopt his goal as our own. We join forces in a coalition of the willing to defeat the power of sin and evil in our lives. We purify ourselves as he is pure.

John notes the distinguishing characteristic of all children of God. It is this willingness and engagement in the process of purification. **If you know God, you are working with him in this process of becoming like him.** You are repenting and growing and becoming incrementally more like him.

The flip side of this if you not, you aren't. Did you catch that? **If you're not growing and purifying, you aren't a child of God.** I know it sounds harsh and judgmental, but there it is. In fact, it gets worse.

John issues a very stern warning that should make each of us sit up and take note. He warns us that if we continue in sin, insensitive to it and static in it, just as happy as a pig in poop, we're not a child of God. **John says we are more like a child of the devil,** who "has been sinning from the beginning."

Children love to imitate their parents. So the critical question for us is who are we imitating? Are we purifying ourselves as he is pure or are we continuing in sin like the devil?

So I guess that's where the rubber hits the road this Sunday as we talk about the relationship we have with God. This is a relationship in which we share knowledge intimacy and love with God. He is our Shepherd, our Father. We are his flock, his children.

His love gives us identity, destiny and power to change. **Our destiny is to be like him, so John is tell us to...*get started*. AMEN**