

Easter 4B 2018 Sermon

1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us-- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

John 10:[10b], 11-18

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

The 1987 Film *Babette's Feast* won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language film.¹ The story takes place in a small village on the remote coast of 19th-Century Denmark. A strict, austere community of devout Christians has organized around a charismatic lay pastor who teaches a somewhat Puritanical, ascetic lifestyle. He disapproves of any suitors who desire to marry either of his two daughters. The old pastor dies, and the two daughters attempt to maintain the religious community as best they can.

But the austere community draws no new converts, and as its members grow older, the community dwindles. The villagers start to get impatient with each other, quietly grumbling and gossiping behind each other's backs, while maintaining an outward façade of piety. One day Babette, a Frenchwoman who is fleeing the counter-revolutionary bloodshed in Paris, arrives at the door of the sisters, and offers herself as a housekeeper, in return for room and board. For the

next 14 years, Babette serves as housekeeper. She gains the trust of the sisters and the community. The only tie Babette still has with her native France is that a friend back in Paris buys her a lottery ticket each year.

A messenger from France arrives one day and tells Babette that she has won the lottery! Babette asks the sisters if she can use the money to prepare a feast for the community, for whom she is grateful. The Puritanical community, while afraid that eating any rich food will send them straight to hell, nonetheless doesn't want to hurt Babette's feelings; so after determining that it would be OK to eat the food as long as they don't enjoy it, they agree to Babette's offer.

Boatloads of food begin to arrive on the shores of the tiny village, and Babette spends days chopping, stirring, slicing, and cooking the food. The community then gathers for the meal, and Babette wears herself out serving the sumptuous 7-course dinner. In the process of eating the meal, the villagers cannot help but be blown away by the rich tastes of the food and wine. Their grudges against each other begin to melt, and they start to ask forgiveness for their gossip and mean thoughts that they have harbored against one another. The meal is truly a eucharistic feast, carrying the grace, forgiveness, and love of God into their very bodies and souls as they eat.

After the meal, the camera shows Babette sitting on a stool in the kitchen, slumped over, totally worn out. She has poured every ounce of her energies into preparing and serving the meal, and she is exhausted, spent. Her shadow, projected on the wall of the kitchen, forms the rough shape of a cross. One of the sisters approaches Babette to thank her and to say that they will miss her when she returns to Paris with the rest of her lottery winnings. Babette tells her that she will be going nowhere, since she spent every penny of the lottery money - 10,000 francs – on the feast for the villagers. It is then revealed that Babette was formerly the head chef of Paris' most famous restaurant.

In today's Epistle from John's First Letter, we read, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and *we* ought to lay down **our** lives for one another." We hear the same theme in today's *Gospel*, where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. ...And I lay down my life for the sheep." We get a clue to what Jesus means by this when he says, "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." John Shea explains, "The Father's life, which is essentially love, flows into Jesus, and the life of the Father and Jesus flows into Jesus' friends. So the Father's self-giving into the Son results in the Son's self-giving into his friends. The completeness and transcendence of this self-giving is revealed when the Good Shepherd gives himself totally in the act of dying. In his death the love of the Father is revealed as sustaining and transforming the friends of Jesus..."²

Like Jesus, Babette pours out *her* life into the lives of *her* friends, spending every ounce of energy and every penny she had in offering the feast, which is a

sacrament of her life and love. And this complete outpouring of love *transforms her* friends, just as **Jesus'** total outpouring of love transformed *his* friends – and continues to transform his friends today – you and me included.

In our Gospel, Jesus contrasts a good shepherd with a “hired hand,” saying, “The hired hand... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.”

My friends, I think that if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that sometimes we are like the good shepherd, and sometimes we are like the hired hand. John Shea explains, “A father holds his newborn daughter and from some vastness within him says, ‘I would die for you.’ ... We all have moments of unconditional love... [when] we open ourselves unreservedly to another and commit ourselves totally to the others’ well-being.”³

But we *also* know what it is to be the hired hand whose commitment to the sheep is conditional and shaky. I recently read about the British vernacular term “jobsworth.” A jobsworth “is a person who won’t lift a finger to do more than the bare minimum their job requires. Ask jobsworths to exert themselves and they’ll decline, saying, ‘It’s more than my job’s worth.’ ... A jobsworth... looks out only for [himself] and stays within the narrow confines of his job description...”⁴

My friends, there are times when you and I are Babettes, good shepherds; and there are times when we are jobsworths, hired hands, giving of ourselves only until such time as it begins to pinch our pocketbook or takes too much energy or offends our sensibilities. In last week’s sermon, I mentioned the experience of opening one’s home to homeless people. Things may go well at first, but when the “guests” in your house begin to damage the house, or begin stealing from you, it’s easy to say to yourself, “This is more than the job of being a Christian is worth.” And **we** have experienced that *same* dynamic on a communal level, as a parish. We have genuinely responded to Jesus’ commandment to “love our neighbor as ourself” by putting up a Little Free Pantry and by offering monthly Laundry Love sessions (among other things). But when people vandalize the pantry, or track mud into the laundromat, it **tests** our love of neighbor, and it would be easy for us to say, “You know, we’ve *tried* to love our neighbor, but this is more than the job’s worth.”

Yet, in so many *other* areas of our life, we accept the reality that to arrive at the good things in life, we must bear some inevitable frustrations and unpleasanties. Sheep are smelly, get dirty, get lost, get sick, become lame, and attract wolves and coyotes. But a good shepherd understands that this is the way things are, and accepts both the ups and downs of the job.

Anyone who has ever owned a dog knows that the love and companionship of a dog comes at a cost. You can expect to have at least some “accidents” in the

house, hairs on your clothing, loud barking, veterinarian bills; and eventually the dog gets sick and dies, causing tremendous grief. Parents who decide to have a baby know that it will come at a cost. They can expect sleepless nights, smelly diapers, constant worry, having the infant take over your life. In the middle of some sleepless night the thought might the parent's head, "Was having a baby worth it?" Yet, for most every parent I've known, the answer is a resounding "Yes!" When it comes to pouring themselves out for their children, 99% of parents I've known are good shepherds, Babettes, willing to pay the cost of love. And imagine what God has to put up with from you and me! Yet God maintains his steadfast love for us. As St. Paul said, "While we were still sinners, he died for us."⁵

The Good Shepherd's love for his sheep is unconditional, and it comes as a grace. We cannot boast of this love, since it is not of our own making. John Shea writes, "[Unconditional love] is the Father's knowing and loving of the Son in which the friends participate..."⁶

Unconditional love is the Father's knowing and loving of the Son in which the friends – you and I – participate.

You and I *participate* in the flow of divine love pouring out *from* the Father, *through* the Son, *into* us, and *out from* us into others. And as we willingly enter into that flow, we become like Babette, the very image of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

AMEN

¹ The description of Babette's Feast is taken largely from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babette%27s_Feast

² John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 124-125

³ Shea, *ibid.*, pp. 125-126

⁴ David Heim, "April 22, Easter 4B," *The Christian Century*, March 23, 2018

⁵ Romans 5:8

⁶ Shea, *ibid.*, p. 127