



TOUCH POINT

All in the Game, or the Name? – Touchpoint for April 17, 2024

John 10:1-15 (NRSVUE) I Am the Good Shepherd

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² 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. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

1 John 3:16-24 (NRSVUE)

¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ 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?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God, ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ 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. ²⁴ 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.

Peace to you in the name of the Mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

Before I begin with John 10: 11 -15, the text assigned for today in the lectionary, I would like to address the 16th verse first.

John 10:16: *“But I have other sheep which are not of this fold. These too I must bring in, and they will hear my voice; and they will become one flock, and there will be one shepherd.”*

I’m very curious why this scripture was not included in today’s assigned lectionary text. William Barclay says, “One of the hardest things in the world to unlearn is exclusiveness. Once a people, or a section of a people, gets the idea that they are specially privileged, it is very difficult for them to accept that the privileges which they believed, belonged to them, and to them only are in fact open to all people.”

But here, Jesus is saying that there will come a day when all people will know him as their Shepherd. Barclay says this was the biggest problem that Jesus was addressing with the Jews. I would say for the most part, this is the problem that God is dealing with concerning American Christianity today. This passage deserves its own Touchpoint on another day. Or maybe every day. Let’s look at today’s passages.

1 John 3:23: *“And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another...”*

The phrase, "In the name of Jesus" concludes many prayers, like the tail of a kite. It may serve to elevate the prayer to a heavenly priority, like a seal on whatever we are expecting God to do, an authoritative name dropping, "I'm with Jesus, Amen!" In those days the question of authority was a big deal. The question of whose name, whose command one is acting upon. Authority rested upon governing kings and rulers.

Walter Brueggemann states that the most important biblical text about governing leadership may be in Ezekiel 34. He writes, "Shepherd had long been a figure for "king" suggesting a regal responsibility for the royal subjects who are as vulnerable as sheep. In the prophetic oracle, Ezekiel begins with a condemnation of "the shepherds" who have been negligent in their duty and have only engaged in self-serving indulgence."

As followers of the Way of Jesus, we see the person of Jesus to be a good shepherd. His reputation for speaking truth to power and living as a good shepherd in obedience to the name of God and in service to people is worthy to be followed. His compassion and willingness to lay his life down between the sheep and the predators was well known. This love of God extends even to our inner voices that stand as predators. John says, "Whenever our hearts condemn us; God is greater than our hearts..."

As a good shepherd, Jesus knew his friends and loved them more than his own physical survival. Jesus warned his sheep of the kings, priests and rulers who did their jobs for power and money. Today he might have a lot to say about the professing Christian predators of our time acting as hired hands rather than good shepherds. It is a regal responsibility to lead others as a shepherd. No wonder Jesus calls leaders to be the least of these, regarding perceived privilege. They would lay their own life down for their friends. They would not need to have any other greater cause to advocate for, but the well-being of others.

I would take a guess that there are more hired hands in ministry than good shepherds. Even the most well intentioned of us, ought to follow the example of the name of Jesus. To pray in the name of Jesus is not simply a resounding "Ta da!" Perhaps it is saying, for example, in the name of the one who never forgets the sheep. In the name of the one who laid his life down for them.

Jesus was killed. But in the journey of his life, he had already given his life away for others in obedience to his good shepherd.

The phrase, "In the name of" encompasses all the facets and events of Jesus's sacrifice, message, and love on behalf of his sheep. It sets apart the allegiance between competing hired hands and shepherds.

Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between those who do it for the money alone, but would run if the sheep were threatened, and those who would lay down their lives.

Listen to what was said about a good shepherd:

It is written of that time, "...a real shepherd was born to his task. He was sent out with the flock as soon as he was old enough to go; the sheep became his friends and his companions; and it became second nature to think of them before he thought of himself. But the false shepherd came into the job, not as a calling, but as a means of making money."

As an invocation, "In the name of..." came at a time when life was dictated by the kings of the day. There was a caste system in religious life. Walter Brueggemann describes the temple similarly as airlines organizations. The cockpit, the first class, coach, rear etc. The temple had the priestly inside, and the marginalized on the outside. You had to have a name to be in first class.

We know that a name carries power. Why else would people be wearing jerseys with a name on their backs that is not their own? It has always been a curious thing to see so many people put other people's names on their shirts. It makes me want to ask them, "You know you're not Michael Jordan, right?"

Everyone wants to be on the winning side. We identify with people and live vicariously through their popularity. You can see it at a basketball game when a player dunks the ball with ferocity. He stops and flexes his biceps. The camera pans to the crowd and there's a young man making the same pose. He's not the one who dunked the ball! Nevertheless, his strength and identity come through his fandom. In Phoenix, you see a lot of Devin Bookers. Red-headed Bookers, female Bookers, and Booker toddlers. My jersey says, "I am here at the game in the name of Booker!"

I'm going to say something that is not meant as a judgment on the athletes or anybody in any occupation who is successful and has a huge following: Most are there for income, popularity, and love of the game. Most have just as many intimate friends who would lay down their lives for them as you or I. They do not know the people who are wearing their names on their backs. They are not having shirts made with the name of one of their followers on their own backs. People might question Michael Jordan about why he is wearing a 'Rojas' jersey. "Who is Rojas, MJ?" someone would say, and Jordan would respond, "Oh, he is one of my 4 billion followers."

Jesus was a good shepherd. In being obedient to the father, he wore our names on his back. I would imagine his pay paled in comparison to the kings of that day and yet he was called the King of Kings. Jesus's credibility came not in what he had, but in who he was. A good shepherd that would lay his life down for others. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing.

There was a French soldier in World War I who was wounded and rushed to surgery. When the soldier awoke, the doctor gave him bad news. He said, "I'm sorry. We needed to take your arm." The soldier immediately responded, "You did not take my arm, I gave it for France."

"In the name of Jesus Christ" to me, is not magical, but it is powerful. *In the name of the one who did not have a place in the Temple's First Class section.* He was from the outside, his name represented the marginalized. His name was in the name of all people, especially those who were excluded, and to all who would welcome him. Because if they accepted Jesus, then they would accept anybody.

Think about it! If Jesus accepted the role as the least of all and laid down his life for all, any rejection of those Jesus loved is a rejection of Jesus as well. And when we love as Jesus loved, we will see caste systems threatened.

"In the name of Jesus" to me means, *In the name of the one who wears the wounds of our lives on his back.* It is not magical, but it is mystical. *In the name of the one whose reputation was of loving indiscriminately. In the name of the one who found a way out of no way, even through doubt and confusion. In the name of the one who has more power than any therapist suggesting I sit beside still waters.* Rather, "In the name of" refers to the one who makes me lie down, in the revelation of God's compassion, beside still waters. Even more, who is calm waters, and whose spirit restores my soul.

Amen

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be still, know that I am God

Spirit Divine

(Keith Duke)

Spirit of love, enfold and teach us; Spirit of peace, rest deep within;
Spirit of change, transform and heal us; Spirit divine; Spirit divine.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Healer of Our Every Ill

(Marty Haugen)

Refrain: Healer of our ev'ry ill, light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

- 1 You who know our fears and sadness, grace us with your peace and gladness;
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. Refrain
- 2 In the pain and joy beholding how your grace is still unfolding,
give us all your vision, God of love. Refrain
- 3 Give us strength to love each other, ev'ry sister, ev'ry brother;
Spirit of all kindness, be our guide. Refrain
- 4 You who know each thought and feeling, teach us all your way of healing;
Spirit of compassion, fill each heart. Refrain.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

("Our Father," The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Benediction

A Celtic Blessing

(Margaret Rizza)

The guarding of the God of Life be on you, the guarding of loving Christ be on you,
the guarding of the Holy Spirit be on you, to aid and uphold you each day and night of your life.
The guarding of God in the guarding of Christ, the guarding of the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen.