

PAY IT FORWARD

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The Church uses many images to describe Jesus, but none as familiar and comforting as the Good Shepherd. When I think about the disciples after the Resurrection, I can't help but think this particular image was very comforting to them as well. They were not well received by those who professed to be the servants of God in their faith tradition – they were outcasts and marginalized by the Jewish leaders, especially after the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. As they continued to spread Jesus message of love and forgiveness of sins, the Good Shepherd, with his loving protection of the lost sheep, must have given solace to them as they went about their ministry. For them, thi image is not at all sentimental – but true intimacy. It gave them the strength they needed to persevere in their Gospel ministry to those who were hungry for a loving God. Even in the passage itself, and in the texts around it, Jesus speaks of the wiles of the time – the violence of

those who did not believe, the dangers that shepherds faced in the wilderness, tending the sheep. These are not reminders of sentimentality, but of spiritual survival and need for God.

If we take a moment to consider Jesus as the shepherd and his followers as the sheep, we see an intimate relationship between them. To know someone's name in the Old Testament and in Jesus' time was to reflect an intimate, personal relationship. The text from John's Gospel states, **"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."**

That is pretty powerful!! To be one of Jesus sheep, is to be known by Jesus just as Jesus and the Father know each other! That is a very weighty responsibility as a follower and believer in Jesus!! It also is a reference to the indwelling of Jesus within us. He is as close to us as we are to ourselves, and in this case, closer!!! This precious gift is not for us alone to cherish and keep for ourselves

alone. Yes, we are certainly to cherish the Indwelling of Christ, but we are also to pay it forward!

Quite a few years ago, we watched the movie Pay It Forward as a church family at Friday Night at the Movies, downstairs in Anderson Hall. The movie is about a little boy who takes on a project for school where he claims he can change the world. This is done by doing small and sometimes big kindnesses for other people – in many cases, people he does not know. All he asks in return is to pay the kindness forward to someone else. Jesus asks the same of us! The gifts of faith, indwelling presence, grace, love and hope do not require us to do anything to receive them. But, because of the love of Jesus and others and our love for them, we feel a desire to do so! The works we do are to express our gratitude and ownership of the gifts received from God. Yes, ownership, for we have been given these freely and we own them. They become a part of who we are and the joy we feel is the catalyst for sharing with others.

Let me give you a concrete example from my own life. I shared last Sunday about my being in recovery. In order to keep the gift of recovery – to own it, I need to give it away. In order for the gift to grow, I need to assist others on their journey. Otherwise, I will grow stagnant and could lose the gift I have been given due to complacency and lack of gratitude. This is not a Christian concept, but a practical one. The same is true with our faith. Have you ever had a time in your life when you moved away from church attendance and got out of the habit of your spiritual practices – for whatever reason? It is hard to maintain a relationship with Jesus when we are not in contact with him. In much the same way, it is difficult to maintain a relationship with a friend if there is not contact or sharing of life. We grow apart.

In our faith lives, an emptiness kicks in and a lack of meaning seeps into our psyche. The way for most of us to reignite the flame of meaningfulness within is to return to an active relationship with God.

Paying forward of our faith come in many forms. It is in working for justice for the poor and those marginalized in society, by building handicapped ramps for those who would be otherwise homebound, by being out in the community so that other learn about what we have here at Emmanuel, by visiting our sick or homebound members, by holding someone's hand in time of difficulty or loss, by participating in the prayer chain, by meeting together to share our insights about scripture or how God is moving in our lives. I could go on and on. There are many ways we can pay forward the gifts we have been given by Jesus.

As Jesus holds the sheep and keeps them safe, he does the same thing for us. We are called to hold others in our hearts as well.