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By Wayne J. Schneider

Are You Sheepish?

1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

On his daily walk, a man heard the plaintive cry of a kitten, but he was unable discern where the cry originated. Finally, he located it high in a tree across the street in a neighbor's yard. As you know, kittens love to explore, and this one had done so to its peril. Unsure of how to get down, the kitten continued to wail.

The man tries to talk the kitty down, "*Here kitty, here kitty,*" with no success. About to give up, his neighbor arrives home. She hears the kitten's cry and joins the man. The kitten quiets when it hears its owner voice, and even attempts a few steps down but freezes. The neighbor also tries 'talking it down' with equal success. Finally, she pulls a garden bench over and starts to climb.

The man proposes that they call the fire department, but she refuses; replying that they need to get the kitten down now, because it may fall. She finally reaches the kitten, tucks it gently into her jacket, and slowly backs down the tree, all the while speaking soothing words.

This story reminds me of today's Gospel lesson. "*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.*" The kitten did not listen to the man's voice because it had not idea who he was. The neighbor used the same words and tone but received different results, because the kitten knew her voice. Her physical presence calmed that kitten. The man gave no thought to climbing the tree, but the owner never thought twice. She cared more about the risk to the cat than to herself. On that day, she was a good "cat-herd."

The model of the "Good Shepherd" is found in both Old and New Testaments. It suggests tender care, which is difficult for us to understand, because most of us are unfamiliar with sheep and shepherds. But, those who heard Jesus speak, would understand perfectly what Jesus is saying.

Sheep owners would keep their sheep for years, as suppliers of wool rather

than meat. Being a shepherd was a 24/7 occupation: protecting the sheep from human and animal predators, as well as the sheep's own proclivity to wander.

Because of the time spent with the sheep, the shepherd learned each of the sheep's qualities and quirks. She or he knew which sheep hogged the greenest parts of the pasture, and which was most likely to get lost. The flock also knew the shepherd. If anyone also called for them, they would not answer. But, when the shepherd called, the sheep went to the shepherd. The shepherd would call their names and they would follow.

Some of the sheep are certainly more loveable than others, but the good shepherd displays the same loving care for the unrulier members of the flock as all others. We are blessed indeed to have Jesus as our Good Shepherd, who loves and cares for us. He displays the depth of his love on the cross, where he willingly gave himself up for us all. And, like sheep, there is nothing we can do to earn this immense love; it is always freely given, often in spite of ourselves. This is the type of love St. John speaks of in 1 John 3:16-24.

We North Americans live in a love-centric world. For example, the song:

- "*All we need is love,*" was first performed by The Beatles on "Our World," the first live global television link, watched by 400 million in 26 countries. Or,
- "*Where is the love?*" by The Black Eye Peas, that peaked at number eight in the United States; and then at number one in Australia and the United Kingdom. The song received two nominations: Record of the Year and Best Rap/Song Collaboration. Or,
- "*What's love got to do with it?*" by Tina Turner. This song ranked #309 on Rolling Stone magazine's list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time". It also ranked #38 on "Songs of the Century." It was the 17th best-selling single of 1984 in the UK and inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2012.

The list goes on and on.... While we are *obsessed with love* and its concept, we understand *little* about 'what love means,' and its implications. Christian love,

Agape, means something entirely different than what our culture dictates. Christian love takes on an enlightened form, because we have chosen Jesus as our template. We must not let the world or the media define love for us; rather, let the Bible *continue to inform us of love's true meaning.*

We begin to understand this kind of love by Jesus Christ's willingness to, as our Good Shepherd, lay down his life for all the sheep. And, out of gratitude for this loving sacrifice, we share this identical love with others. It is not enough that we are the sheep of the "Good Shepherd," we must become 'shepherds' ourselves.

If we claim that we are in love with God, but refuse to care for others, were are not shepherds but hired hands, to which Jesus referred as people who cared for others, only when the cost was not significant. St. John explains that our love must not be in word only, but in truth and action. Truth always requires risk, not just of the material, but of soul and heart too.

Like Jesus, we need understand the people around us intimately. This can be hazardous, for it is less painful to live life with only a surface knowledge of other people. Yet, it is only in seeing people as God sees them, in understanding that they too are God's children, made in the Imago Dei, the image of God, that we will begin to care enough to love unconditionally, to love as a shepherd loves her sheep.

"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." We are sheep in God's flock, called in love by the Good Shepherd, to be 'caring shepherds,' loving others in truth and in action. Alleluia. Amen.

Cum Sancto Spiritu.