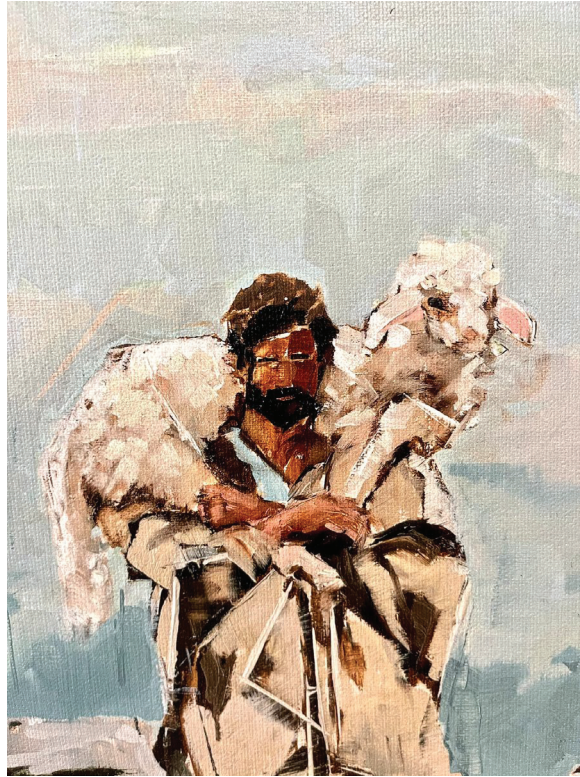


The Tenacity of Tenderness

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Shepherd" by Amanda Scott

Prayer of Illumination

God of abundant life,
your grace is our daily bread.
Nourish us by your Word
and fill us by your Spirit
so that we may grow in faith and love;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

In the verse before our morning's reading, Jesus says these words to the crowds traveling with him: *If you have ears to hear, then hear!*

In the very next verse that begins our morning's passage, we see the tax collectors and sinners flocking to Jesus. They're leaning in on the edge of their seats to *hear* Jesus better. The ears of

the Pharisees and scribes, however, are a different story. We hear them grumbling about “that fellow” Jesus. They hear Jesus, but they don’t like what they hear. He’s welcoming sinners and eating with them—people that are, in their minds, harming the community and home. So Jesus does one of his favorite things: he tells a story.

Let’s hear the Word of the Lord from:

Gospel Reading: Luke 15:1-7 (NRSVue)

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Tenacity of Tenderness

I grew up watching Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood. I loved his gentle spirit and his sneakers and cardigan sweaters. And I thought it was pretty cool that he was a Presbyterian minister, too. Mr. Rogers was Rev. Rogers.

There was such a tenderness about him, yet there was a real tenacity to his tenderness. He was fearless about guiding children through the tough things that inevitably happen in this life.

Through the decades he talked about the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the 70s he talked about the Iran Hostage Crisis and in the 80s the Challenger space shuttle explosion. He talked about divorce, death, racism, and what to do with our feelings of anger. Mr. Rogers was a shepherd to his little lambs across the nation entrusted to his care.



When 9/11 happened, Mr. Rogers had already finished taping his final show after 31 seasons. Parents were begging him to help the children process the traumatic events of September 11th (21 years ago today). And so he came out of retirement and recorded several short messages. And in one of them, he said these words:

When I was a boy and I would see scary things on the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

In the midst of the devastation and heartache, we look for the helpers and thank God for first responders. I love Jesus' short parable. The shepherd is a helper for the sheep, the sheep's first responder, a person on a search and rescue mission.

Being a shepherd in ancient Judea wasn't an easy task—in fact, it was a job fraught with danger. Vast waterless deserts and plunging cliffs were all around. Shepherds lived life exposed to the elements. They were trained to be able to track for miles footprints through the desert, even at the risk of their own lives. Tending their sheep often meant sleepless nights. In the midst of hyena howls, the shepherd constantly scanned his flock for missing sheep. He was responsible for them. It's no wonder that it's one of the primary images for God.

Psalm 23 says, "The Lord is my *what?*... shepherd." "I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus in another gospel, "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." And also, "I came to seek and to save the lost."

Jesus reminds us of something very important: we all count. He loves all 100, but especially the lost one. The strays and the stragglers. God counts the very number of hairs on our head. God counts us. And being made in God's image, we're reminded to make everyone feel counted. We don't take people for granted whether it's Mary's little lamb or the black sheep of the family. We have a tenacious tenderness.

If Jesus is like a shepherd, we're a lot like sheep. Sheep are notoriously foolish animals—famous for wandering and losing their way. Sheep need a shepherd, and so do we. "For you were going astray like sheep," says the Apostle Peter, "but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

This is the tenderness of Christ—he doesn't lambaste us when we wander. He seeks us out and scoops us up into his living arms. He loves and likes us and wants to bring us back home. He celebrates and brings friends and neighbors together to celebrate. The kingdom of God is a party. I love the imagery of the sheep on Jesus' shoulders. It takes me back to my childhood when my dad would sometimes pick me up "fireman's carry" style over his shoulders and carry me to bed.

There's a great passage in Ezekiel 34 that I think helped shape Jesus' parable:

I shall tend my flock, and find them a place to rest, says the Lord God. I shall search for the lost, recover the straggler, bandage the injured, strengthen the sick, leave the healthy and

strong to play, and give my flock their proper food...I shall set over them one shepherd to take care of them, my servant David, he will care for them and be their shepherd.

And so, Christ, the Son of David not only takes us up on his shoulders, he calls us to put on his heart, to tenaciously and tenderly look out for strays. Praying for, searching for, shedding tears for those that have lost their way. Like Jesus, we don't give up on them. We have Christ's tenacity of tenderness.

I'd like to conclude with a moving true story.

Seminary professor and author Andrew Root tells a story about a man born in a small midwestern town at the turn of the twentieth century. He was born with a physical deformity that marked his body. His mother and father rejected him, but being their responsibility, they hired a young immigrant girl to raise their child. She wasn't much older than the child herself, but she showered him with love, looked at him in the eye, and tenderly touched all of his supposedly monstrous traits. She told the boy he was beautiful and regularly told him all the things she loved about him. But her favorite thing to do was sing to him. Dozens of times each day she would sing the same refrain. As he grew, so did their connection. But, when he reached the age of five, the parents realized it made better financial sense to have him institutionalized. Before saying goodbye, the young girl sang to the boy his song one last time. With time, the only thing he could remember about the girl who loved him was her name. He spent the next thirteen years of his life being raised in the harsh institutional conditions of twentieth century asylums. By age eighteen he'd had enough and he was free to leave. He checked himself out, found the tallest hill he could find, and brought with him the pills that would end his tortured life. "Why God? Why have you hated me so much? You've never cared for me. Now I'm going to end your disgust of me by ending my misery." As he was just about to swallow the bitter pills, he heard singing behind him. The person's voice was clear and sweet:

*God's mercy is wide,
God's love is deep,
and you dear child are loved.*

He searched for the voice—he saw no one, yet he heard the refrain yet again:

*God's mercy is wide,
God's love is deep,
and you dear child are loved.*

Leaving the pills behind, he headed down the mountain. He knew he was not alone, even if he felt alone and rejected. Still broken, yet touched by the tender voice, he became a pastor, and over the next fifty years, he helped the flock under his care to hear the voice of God guiding them. Yet even into his seventies, he couldn't explain the song he heard on the hilltop.

By chance, he got word that the young girl who cared for him was still alive. She was in her eighties now. But he could remember almost nothing about her. She was nothing but a stranger until their eyes met. Her kind eyes awakened his soul. It was as if he was a five-year old child

again and he felt the closeness of her care and joy next to him. As they talked, the now old woman shared that she never felt more important, more called to something beyond herself, than when she cared for the boy as an infant, to embrace him and share in his life. As she shared, the years of anguish and sorrow of abandonment melted away in the warmth of her love. She took his hand and asked if he remembered the song she sang to him so long ago. And with her gentle, aged voice she sang—

*"God's mercy is wide,
God's love is deep,
and you dear child are loved."*

Shivers went deep into the old man's soul, and his mind raced back to when he was eighteen on that hilltop. Through that young woman, the Good Shepherd left the 99 to find and sing over the one lost sheep.

We all count in the Lord's eyes—no matter who you are.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Shepherd"* by Amanda Scott, [Amanda Scott Art Studio](#)

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