

John 10:11-18 (NRSV)

"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."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. On this day we reflect on the texts that use the metaphor of "The Good Shepherd" to describe God the Creator and God in Christ. That is what a metaphor does, to say that something is like something else. Some of the teachers in the congregation will know that there are technical distinctions between metaphors and similes and analogies that I am not paying attention to and let be ask for your indulgence.

Usually in a metaphor, we take something we know to describe something we don't know. So, when I say "My love is like a red, red rose" I am using the image of a red, red rose, something that you know is warm and beautiful and perfect, to describe my love, who you don't know – well, you do, of course, it's my wife, Linda, and you'll agree it is an apt metaphor, but that's a different sermon.

Anyway, as I walked with the text today for Good Shepherd Sunday, I realized that almost everything I know about shepherds comes from sermons on Good Shepherd Sunday. I remember Bishop Schneider, our previous Bishop, used to do a wonderful sermon in which he would lie down with his crozier, his Bishop's staff in his arms to illustrate how shepherds would sleep in the gate of the sheep pen so that anyone who wanted to get to the sheep would have to go past him, literally over his body. From this I learned that a shepherd would protect and defend his sheep just the way that God protects and defends us, and that is a good thing. But if, on Good Shepherd Sunday, we use what we know about God to tell us about shepherds, then the metaphor is sort of working backwards. I want to learn about God, not about shepherds.

Now, the idea of a metaphor is a good idea when we're talking about God – we use something we know to describe God, whom we don't know too well directly. We frequently use metaphors to talk about God. As it turns out, there is a branch of theology called Metaphorical Theology that helps us think about metaphors for God. One metaphor we use very frequently is "God as Father." We use it in prayers – "Our Father, who art in heaven" and we use it in Creeds, "I believe in God the Father Almighty" – in fact we use it so frequently we sometimes forget it is a metaphor. It is a good metaphor – many of us think very fondly of our fathers, how they care for us, how they love us.

We should remember, though, that some people don't have quite as good memories of their fathers, for whatever reason. For them, the metaphor might get in the way of their love of God, because every time we say, "God the Father," instead of warm and happy thoughts they might think bitter and angry thoughts. Now if "Father" is only one of many metaphors we use to describe God, this may not be so serious a problem. But when Father is the only metaphor we use, or one of only two or three, then it can be a serious problem for people who have less positive memories of their fathers.

And there is another problem. When we start overusing a single metaphor to describe God, we can begin to mistake the metaphor for what is being described. You see, metaphors are always partly wrong. So, when I said, “My love is like a red, red rose,” I didn’t mean to say that my love really *is* a red, red rose. That’s overusing the metaphor. When I say, “God the Father,” I don’t mean to say, “God really is my father” – that is also overusing the metaphor.

So, the field of Metaphorical Theology takes as its task generating and evaluating metaphorical language about God. As we said, the Bible uses lots of metaphors about God – we’ve already talked about the Good Shepherd and God the Father. The prophet Ezekiel talks about God as the faithful husband of Israel and Israel as an unfaithful wife. We talk about God as the Rock of our Salvation, We have a lot of metaphors for Jesus – as the Light of the World, as the Lamb of God, as the True Vine.

There have also been some metaphors that aren’t so successful – Jesus as our CEO, our chief executive officer – this appeared in a bunch of books in the 1990’s. Now, it’s interesting to think about why this metaphor is not so successful. A CEO runs a company and acts as a leader, provides a vision for the company, motivates members of the company to work hard, and so on. But, particularly in the current economic climate, much of the popular regard for CEO’s has gone away – they seem more selfish and arrogant than we like to think about Jesus being. Also, CEO seems more trendy than timeless and we don’t like our metaphors to go out of fashion so quickly.

Sallie McFague,¹ a well-known theologian, thinks that God as a friend is a good metaphor, and I’m inclined to agree with her. A friend cares for us, walks with us, has our interests at heart. These things are also true about God. A friend is loyal and trustworthy, a friend won’t abandon us when we are in need. A friend shares with

¹ Sallie McFague (1988) *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

us. A friend chooses us, just as God has chosen us to have a special, deep relationship with, a relationship that is not exclusive but is, nonetheless, deep and individual. I like the idea that God chose me, chose me to spend time with, to work with, to walk with, to have a special relationship with. That doesn't mean that God doesn't have other special relationships with other people – friends aren't exclusive. In fact, sometimes I can make new friends by meeting people who God is friends with – in a lot of ways, that is what church is about at its best.

That is another benefit to the friend analogy – we can be friends to each other as God is a friend to us. We can at least try to be loyal, to have others' interests at heart, we can love each other as friends in ways that aren't exclusive or romantic or jealous. And we understand friendship, we know how good it feels to have a good friend and to be a good friend. We also know, I think, that friendship is a relationship that is too rare in the world – that we can work at being better friends for each other and that that will make us better people as well.

And we can also be a friend to things besides people – we can be friends of the earth, we can be friends to all living things. To be oriented to friendship is to be oriented to benevolence and generosity.

The friendship metaphor for God also helps us to ask questions. For example, friendship is usually a relationship of equality, or at least mutual respect. Does our friendship with God work the same way? Well, it's hard to argue that we are equals with God, but God in the Bible seems to respect people's decisions and choices, even bad ones. When the Israelites demand a king, God tries to talk them out of it, as a friend would, but eventually respects their choices and helps them to get the best king He can, but still respects that king's, King David's choices, too, even when they are disastrous.

So, from the metaphor of God as friend, we are pushed to think more about our relationship with God – does God allow us our choices and decisions even when they aren't very good?

Now, the idea of God as our friend is not a new idea – the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” uses this analogy. But as I think about our situation in the world today, friendship seems to be an especially valuable relationship. “Companion,” another word for friend, literally means one with whom we share bread, just as we are about to do in the Lord's Supper and as we do each day with all the people of the world.

But the big point I'd want to make today is that all talk about God is metaphorical. We don't know God directly and fully and so it is helpful for us to say, “God is like ... ” and try to fill in the blank. Sometimes these metaphors are helpful – God is like a good, generous loving Father or Mother. Sometimes, metaphors don't work as well as they used to, when the metaphor meant more to us. So, God as the Good Shepherd doesn't work as well when we don't know much about shepherds. Some metaphors, like God as CEO, don't really illuminate the nature of God. These fall out of use fairly quickly.

But remember, metaphors are always a little bit wrong even when they are very good. My love is not really a red, red rose, God is not really my Father or Mother or Good Shepherd, or even my friend, even though I think “God as friend” is a good and helpful metaphor. Our words are only a pale reflection of the reality of God. God is generous beyond any Father or Mother we can imagine, caring beyond any shepherd we know, loyal beyond any friend we have. God is like all these things and beyond all of them.

So we use a variety of metaphors – to make our language about God as rich and beautiful and true as we can. We can never capture the reality of God but sometimes, when we are creative and thoughtful and loving, we can reflect it. Amen.