

“Our Stewardship of God’s Precious Gifts”

John 10:11-18; Psalm 23

Preached from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Fourth Sunday in the Season of Easter, April 22, 2018
Matt Matthews

This is a sermon about caring the *things* and the *relationships* God has entrusted to our care.

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You know I love the snow. One reason I love it so much, as I have hinted to you before, is that it is lovely.^[1]

The great artist Michelangelo said, “God is the first artist.” And every season of nature—even now spring is springing—gives us an opportunity to see God’s redeeming, creative hand at work in our world.

On the second week of October, I want as many of you as possible to come with me and Rachel to the Montreat Conference Center nestled in the Black Mountains east of Asheville. The conference is about power; it will examine how we use and abuse power. The conference will address race, gender, privilege, structures of power and of the powerless. It’ll be a great conference.

But the main reason I want to go with you to Montreat this fall is because it is beautiful there, and I want to be on retreat with you in valleys lined with streams and trails. To stand by Lake Susan is akin to standing in the palm of God’s hand.

“I have heard the mountains calling,” wrote the naturalist John Muir. “I have heard the mountains calling, and I must go.”

The leaves will be changing in October. First frost will be in the air on the bright, early mornings. I am hearing the mountains calling. Come with us to Montreat in October.^[2]

God is the first artist, said Michelangelo. And the beauty of God’s world brings healing to us if we open our eyes and senses long enough to take it in.^[3] Snow in April in Champaign. Now, spring. Soon, summer. October, leaves in Montreat. Snow, glorious snow, in winter.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down—where? In green pastures. On the verdant prairie to which God leads, I’ll find repose, rest, a million graces, even God’s very own delight.

He leadeth me—where? Beside the still waters. Near this gentle stream I’ll find calm. In this crazy-busy world I’ll find some needed rest.

Green pastures.

Still waters.

This is how Eugene Peterson puts it:

God, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.

This is a sermon about caring for these things. This is a sermon about caring for the things and the relationships God has entrusted to our care.

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When we love somebody, we create beautiful things for them: we cook meals, we cultivate gardens, we paint pictures, we buy them beautiful things. And so it is with God; God loves us, and so God planted us in a land abounding with beauty—with green pastures, with still waters. Spring in Champaign. Autumn in Montreat.

I have heard the mountains calling, and I must go. I have heard the mountains, the lake, the seashore, the canyons, the forests, the fields, the backyard garden, the sunset, the night sky—I have heard these exquisite places calling my name. The Grand Tetons, the California coast, Hessel Park, Westside Park, the Japanese Gardens in Urbana. God speaks to us from the beauty of these places. God calls us away from the tangle of our hectic lives and invites us to step into the wonder of nature where we will find calm and respite.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.

For those of you taking notes, write this down: God has given us natural beauty to enthuse, calm, and inspire us. And God has given us these precious things because God loves us.

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As this is true, how vital it is that we take care of what God has entrusted to our care. The rivers and the streams are ours to use and enjoy, but not to waste or abuse. And yet we pollute as if our future doesn't depend on clean water. *Lord, have mercy.*

Not only does God give us natural resources, God gives us the precious gift of community. If the US could raise \$5 billion dollars, a group like UNICEF could use it to take a serious chunk out of childhood disease and starvation. *But preacher, you say, we don't have five billion dollars!* That's true. In 2016, in this country alone we spent \$9.1 billion on Halloween supplies.

Lord, have mercy.

God has given us the precious gift of communities in which we are nurtured and grow. We are called to take care of our community. We are called to be good stewards.

Starbucks has been in the news lately. You know the story. A manager called the police on two black men who were visiting in a shop but had not ordered anything. They weren't hurting anyone, but they also weren't sipping hazelnut macchiato. The police came. They were politely arrested. My lovely, sometimes broke, sons have spent weeks in a Starbucks without ordering anything, but they were not arrested. Is it because they are not black? Starbucks is closing nearly 8,000 stores nationwide for a day in May in order that employees can have some needed conversations about race, about where their blinders are, about prejudice, about fear. This is a good thing. Kudos, Starbucks.

God has given us communities in which to live and grow. Are we not called to take care of those communities? If so, that means we dare to have difficult conversations with one another about race, gender, power, and a million other cultural differences. If we talk about such things, the conversation about differences brings us wonderfully together; if we don't talk about such things, if we deny our differences, if we shove them underground our differences will continue to divide and antagonize us.

This morning, we prayed this prayer as our prayer of confession. You said these words with your own lips:

O God,

*forgive our wanton waste of the
wealth of the soil and sea and air;*

*forgive our desecration of natural
beauty;*

*forgive our heedlessness of those
who shall come after us;*

forgive our undue love of money;

*forgive our contempt for small things
and our worship of what is big;*

forgive our neglect of struggling peoples.

*For such wrongs to our natural and human
heritage,*

and for many things left undone, forgive us, O God.

(Forgive Us, adapted from Willard L. Sperry)

If we care for God's gift to us of place and community, we pay attention to what we spend, what we waste, our motives and prejudices, how we love, and how we share and take care of what we have.

God restores us through both natural beauty and vital relationships with one another. *The Lord is my shepherd.* God has given us these things why?

Because God loves us.

* * *

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus says in John's gospel. A good shepherd—a really good one—will lay down his life for his flock. This is the kind of sacrifice Jesus invites us to make on behalf of others. This is the kind of elbow grease Jesus wants us to put into loving one another. Dare we trust him that far? Dare we follow him that far? Dare we risk loving the community that much? Dare we go all the way to . . . Cuba?

Today we commission the saints among us who are going to Cuba to deepen our partnership with our sister congregation in Havana. A small group is going. But over the years, many of you have gone. Next year, God willing, I will go.

These trips to and from Cuba are a small sign of the big things God is doing through our worldwide relations. God loves us, and we love God back by loving others. This is why we deeply care about this important partnership with Luyano.

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God has given us much to treasure. We are to take care of those things God uses to bless the world. Green pastures. Still waters. Friendships with those on the other side of the sea.

May we walk humbly and gratefully. May we care deeply, taking good, good care of God's many graces.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

[1] No, I suppose it's not so lovely when it's been on the ground for a week, when it's been plowed, after it had turned brown and yellow from mud and road salt. It's not lovely when it's become a frozen danger, when people are slipping, wrecking, being dangerously encumbered. But when it's coming down . . . I don't see the danger or the mess, I see only the beauty.

[2] Matt & Rachel Matthews invite you to attend with them **The Better Angels Conference/ Using the Power of Community to Change the World**, October 8-11, at the Montreat Conference Center, Montreat, NC. When we look at the intersection of today's headlines and God's concern we see topics like racism, #metoo, immigration, and violence. In each of these discussions, the common thread is power. It's the same when we look at the topics of spirited discussion in our churches, like the budget, mission, stewardship, and recruitment of leaders. And yet power is something we rarely talk about, analyze, or organize around, even though we're dealing with it, using it, or finding ourselves without it, all the time. **Better Angels** invites you to enter the discussion of power where you find it most relevant, by choosing one of several areas of concentration including gender and power in church settings, race, and toxic charity. See the following link for more info. <http://www.montreat.org/better-angels/>

[3] God brings to us restoration, wholeness, succor, and peace, in part, through the restorative power of creation.