

Easter 4 B
John 10:11-15; 1 John 3:16-18
April, 21, 2024

“Mary Had a Little Lamb”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

‘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 God knows me and I know God. And I lay down my life for the sheep.’

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

~o~

Most of us know the little nursery rhyme, Mary Had a Little Lamb. Let’s say it together.

*Mary had a little lamb;
Its fleece was white as snow;
And everywhere that Mary went,
The lamb was sure to go.*

I recently learned that the nursery rhyme, which was first published in 1830, is based on an actual incident involving Mary Elizabeth Sawyer, a

woman born in 1806 on a farm in Sterling, Mass. In 1815, Mary, then nine, was helping her father with farm chores when they discovered a sickly newborn lamb in the sheep pen that had been abandoned by its mother. After a lot of pleading, Mary was allowed to keep the animal, although her father didn't hold out much hope for its survival. Against the odds, Mary managed to nurse the lamb back to health.

“In the morning, much to my girlish delight, it could stand; and from that time it improved rapidly. It soon learned to drink milk; and from the time it would walk about, it would follow me anywhere if I only called it,” Mary would later write in the 1880s, many decades after the incident. And, yes, the lamb would indeed follow her wherever she went and did have a fleece as white as snow.

Sometime later, it's uncertain exactly when, Mary was heading to school with her brother when the lamb began following them. The siblings apparently weren't trying very hard to prevent the lamb from tagging along, even hauling it over a large stone fence they had to cross to get to Redstone School, the one-room schoolhouse they attended. Once there, Mary secreted her pet under her desk and covered her with a blanket. But when Mary was called to the front of the class to recite her lessons, the lamb popped out of its hiding place and, much to Mary's chagrin and to the merriment of her classmates, came loping up the aisle after her. The lamb was shooed out, where it then waited outside until Mary took her home during lunch. The next day, John Roulstone, a student a year or two older, handed Mary a piece of paper with a poem he'd written about the previous day's events.¹

It's kind of a sweet story, isn't it? Mary's lamb even grew up to have three lambs of her own. Beginning with a text about the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep, you probably wondered if this would have a

¹ Andrew Amelinckx. “The True Story Behind *Mary Had a Little Lamb*,” Modernfarmer.com, December 19, 2017, <https://modernfarmer.com/2017/12/true-story-behind-mary-little-lamb/>.

happy ending, didn't you? Truth is, we rarely know where things will go until we actually get there.

Believe it or not, it's been three years since we began our relationship together as minister and congregation. My very first sermon after arriving in Aurora in 2021 was on Good Shepherd Sunday. At that point, I'm fairly sure that we were all wondering where things would go from there. I know I was.

Three years ago, I encouraged us to be shepherds to one another and live like the Good Shepherd for the sake of our world. Today, though, I'd like to warn us from taking that directive too far. You see, for the author of the Gospel According to John, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was inarguably destined to lay down his life for the sheep. We, however, are not.

Elucidating and expanding on this text, the author of the epistle of First John clarifies what this means for us. Yes, Jesus laid down his life for the sheep and we should do likewise, but, what does that look like? It looks like seeing someone in need and helping them. It looks like living our love, not just in words, but in truth and in action. Laying down our life does not mean offering ourselves as the ultimate sacrifice. Laying down our life does not mean dying for others. It means living for others which, in some cases, is even harder.

What are *we* willing to live for? A partner? Children? A Career? A cause? A life of service? What are we willing to pour ourselves into, day after day? What are we willing to get out of bed for? It may not be just one thing. It may be a guiding principle, like the one suggested by the author of First John: love lived in truth and action. But it's a worthwhile question to consider. What are we willing to live for?

Little Mary Elizabeth Sawyer lived for her little lamb, nursing it to health, teaching it to drink from a bottle, encouraging it to walk with her and get stronger. Laying down one's life for the sheep is a noble sentiment. It's certainly how the author of John's gospel interpreted the events of Jesus' life. But the author of First John challenges us to lay down our lives and then to pick them up again to be lived in the service of love, expressed in truth and action toward others.

Today, on the eve of Earth Day, one might take the epistle author's challenge a bit further: to live love in truth and action for the sake of others and the Earth. After all, working toward sustainable living and a healthy planet would be a worthwhile labor of love in action. Future generations would certainly look back with gratitude.

Whatever it is we decide we're living for, Marcus Aurelius reminds us that, "It is not death that [one] should fear, but rather [...] never beginning to live."

Amen.