

“I’m Thankful for Sheepdogs, Mama!”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC Grand Junction,
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This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ
website: www.fumcgj.org/media/

Scripture: Romans 12:4-8 [NLT].
Secondary Text: Psalm 147:7-11.

Picking up on the theme of Anna’s Children’s Message, the Psalmist exhorts us in Psalm 147:7, “Sing out your thanks to the LORD; sing praises to our God, accompanied by harps,” [Psalm 147:7, NLT]...because God does wonderful things...tending to the needs of creation: rain for the earth, food for all living things, and so on. A few verses later, the Psalmist asserts, “the LORD’s delight is in those who honor him, those who put their hope in his unfailing love.”

Psalm 147 serves to focus our attention on God, the One on Whom all of our thanksgiving is ultimately focused, even if through various persons who have earned our appreciation. This day, as we honor those among us who have given of themselves and, in many cases, risked their lives for our safety and continued prosperity, we would do well to hear the Psalmist’s words in the background. We honor the Veterans among us by giving thanks to God for them and their service.

I was raised in the family and home of a 30-year

career Naval officer and am privileged to know many persons who have served in our Armed Forces. And the finest among them would embrace this idea of honoring them by expressing our thanks for their service not to them but through them to God. They know what it is to rely on God’s unfailing love because they’ve been in hard situations where that’s all they’ve had to rely on. As a way of honoring all of them, I want to share the stories of two of them whose understandings of their service and sacrifice have affected me profoundly.

THE STORIES of TWO FRIENDS

The first is the story of a dentist friend of mine who, in response to the needs for his skills, joined the Army late in his life – so late in fact that he needed an age waiver to get in. But, it was 2007 and with the war in Iraq in full swing, the Army was in need of skilled professionals especially in the health fields. My friend dreamed of being able to provide high quality dental care to our men and women on the front lines in Iraq, as an in-kind act of appreciation for all they were risking in their service to our country. This dream kept him going through Officer Candidate School, which is like bootcamp for officers, and all the Reserve training required to prepare him to serve in the Army in a wartime environment.

Finally, it came time to deploy to Baghdad and the base where he would begin providing dental care to those on the front lines. But where he was needed most was not in a well-appointed dental clinic in Baghdad but in a primitively-appointed clinic housed in a tent-like

structure in a remote camp in the barren Iraqi desert. There, he would tend not to the needs of his fellow American soldiers but to “Iraqi detainees”: a euphemism for “terrorists” who were now prisoners of war and who, like the American soldiers they were fighting against, also had need of his dental skills and experience.

My friend was given his choice, and he ultimately chose to tend to the needs of the Iraqi detainees in that remote clinic in the Iraqi desert in a camp that was subject to shelling and rocket attacks rather than to serve in a settled and relatively calm part of Baghdad. Those whose dental needs to which he attended had to be handcuffed and accompanied by armed guards, so they wouldn’t attack him and others who were trying to provide them with dental care. Why did he subject himself to this? Because his own dependence on “God’s unfailing love” compelled him to live that out in witness even to his enemies. He and his fiancée even put off their later-in-life wedding for a year because he knew he had to respond to this stirring of his soul to serve honorably and faithfully in this way.

The other story involves a friend who had made a career of the Army and who had served admirably in many settings, including a couple of deployments in Iraq. I was most fascinated by this friend’s telling of his last deployment, not as a senior officer leading troops into combat but as an ambassador of sorts, working with local villagers to learn how to stand together and protect themselves against the attacks of insurgents. Here again was someone who, rather than fighting Iraqi

combatants, found himself collaborating with civilian locals helping them to secure a better life and future for themselves, their families, and their villages. He was a man of deep courage and deep faith who gave me the image of the Veteran I’d like to share with you now...



...through a story I wrote to honor these two friends and all Veterans. I call it, “Thank God for Sheepdogs”.

“THANK GOD FOR SHEEPDOGS”

“I don’t like Winston, Mama,” the little lamb complained to his mother. She was nuzzling straw around him as she tucked him in for the night.

“Why in the world don’t you like Winston?” she asked.

“Because he’s *mean* to us,” the little lamb wailed. “He bosses us around... he barks at us...he nips at us, if we don’t do what he says...and he’s always telling us scary stories...about owls and FOXES and COYOTES out past the ravine!”

“Oh...I see,” the little lamb’s mother said in an understanding tone. “Well you know, little one, there was a time when Winston didn’t live with us on the ranch. In fact, there was a time when we didn’t have *any* dogs on the ranch with us.”

“There was?” he asked in disbelief.

“Mm-hmm...a long time ago, back when I was a little lamb like you. Way back then, all we had was the shepherd who did what he could to watch over us, but there was way too much pasture for him to keep track of all of us on. And every so often, one of the sheep would get so distracted grazing that they’d forget where they were and would wander off far past the ravine and we’d never see them again.” “Oooo...” the little one mused.

And his mother continued, “Sometimes, if one of the little lambs like you didn’t stay with the moms and the dads and the uncles and the aunts and the rest of the herd after dark, one of the big forest owls would swoop in on silent wings and carry them off. We never would find out what happened to them, and that made everyone really sad and really scared.”

“At other times, a group of coyotes or a fox would prowl around in the ravine and if one of us got too far away from the herd, they’d rush in and attack us. We’d put up a fight and try to get away, but most of the times they’d win, and we’d lose a member or two of the family in that attack, and we’d be really sad and really scared again.”

“Mama, I don’t like this story...”, the little lamb

complained.

“I know little one, but it gets better – because that’s when Winston came to live with us on the ranch. You see, Winston’s a sheepdog, and sheepdogs have a very special role here: *They help to keep us safe*. If we start to wander too far off from the herd, they bark at us to get us back to safety. If we don’t listen or we don’t move fast enough, they’ll nip at our heels or back ends to get us to respond. And they tell us stories of what has happened in the past, so that we don’t forget about the dangers out past the ravine. Because when there haven’t been any attacks in a while, it’s easy for us to forget that dangers really are out there. And so, Winston and the other sheepdogs tell us those stories, not to scare us, but to help keep us alert and safe. And if they need to, they’ll even attack those foxes and coyotes and other animals that want to kill us and drive them off into the forest.”

“Why do they do that, Mama? Do they like to *fight* a lot?”

“Oh...I suppose some may, but I don’t think that’s why most of the sheepdogs do what they do. I think it’s because they love the ranch – and they love us who live on it. And they want to protect what they love. They feel so strongly about this that they’re willing to risk not being understood by some of us on the ranch. They’re willing to risk getting hurt, and they’re even willing to risk losing their own lives – all because they love the ranch and want to protect it.”

“Wow...” the little lamb said, feeling just a little

overwhelmed. “I’ve never thought of all those things before.” What he heard began to help him understand Winston a little better.

“I also think that God blessed sheepdogs in a special way by giving them a calling to do what they do *and* the gifts to be able to do it well.”

After a few quiet moments had passed, the little lamb’s face lit up with excitement, “Mama, I wanna be a *sheepdog* – *Grrrrr!* See?!” he blurted out with exuberance.

“Oh, little one, you can’t be a sheepdog! God created you with different gifts and a different calling. But you can look at Winston and the other sheepdogs with more understanding and acceptance for all they do for us, and you can be a little more responsive to what they say.”

His mother let that sink in for a moment or two and then bent over and kissed her little one goodnight and turned softly to leave.

She hadn’t gotten out of the stall door when her little one called after her, “Mama?”

“Yes?” she answered.

“I’m thankful for sheepdogs.”

“Me, too, little one...me, too.”



**Thank You!
and God Bless You**



CONCLUSION

Reflecting back on the Romans passage that started us out, I’d like to conclude with two points: One is simply to say that God has given all of us gifts with which we are to honor him and cultivate the beloved community of Jesus in our midst. If enough of us take that seriously for long enough, that “beloved community” will begin to look like the Kingdom of God Jesus talked so much about.

The second is to say that while we are honoring our Veterans today, and rightly so in my opinion, we also have a group of folks here at the Church who serve as sheepdogs among us that I’d like to honor, as well. And that is our Safety and Security Team. Unlike their counterparts in some churches, even here in the Valley, they don’t make a big deal about it. They don’t dress in

a uniform; they don't wear a badge; they don't carry anything that could be construed as a weapon – at least not that we can see! And most of them are in no condition to render protective force against an attacker on your or my behalf. But they are here, they take turns watching the doors through our security camera system, and they watch for anything or anyone that looks out of the ordinary, so that protective action might be taken if that's needed. These are our sheepdogs, and I wanted to offer a word of thanks to them for their service to us. Given the violence that continues to visit itself upon innocents across our nation, it is important for you to know that your fellow church members care enough to be on the lookout for us. This, too, is part of cultivating “beloved community”...at least until such time as God sees fit to establish the New Jerusalem upon the earth.

And so, to echo Paul, take the gifts that God has given you and exercise them with confidence, generosity, and zeal! And *if yours* is the gift of vigilance, then watch and protect...with love...for all.

(*Close the sermon with prayer...*)