



## SUNDAY SERMON

# A Sacred Economy of Relationship

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“Welcome. And congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn’t easy, I know. In fact, I suspect it was a little tougher than you realize.

“To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and intriguingly obliging manner to create you. It’s an arrangement so specialized and particular that it has never been tried before and will only exist this once. For the next many years (we hope) these tiny particles will uncomplainingly engage in all the billions of deft, cooperative efforts necessary to keep you intact and let you experience the supremely agreeable but generally underappreciated state known as existence.

“Why atoms take this trouble is a bit of a puzzle. Being you is not a gratifying experience at the atomic level. For all their devoted attention, your atoms don’t actually care about you – indeed, don’t even know that you are there. They don’t even know they are there. They are mindless particles, after all, and not even themselves alive. Yet somehow for the period of your existence they will answer to a single overarching impulse: to keep you you.

“The bad news is that atoms are fickle and their time of devotion is fleeting – fleeting indeed. Even a long human life adds up to only about 650,000 hours. And when that modest milestone flashes past, or at some other point thereabouts, for reasons unknown your atoms will shut you down, silently disassemble, and go off to be other things. And that’s it for you.

“Still, you may rejoice that it happens at all. Generally speaking in the universe it doesn’t, so far as we can tell. This is decidedly odd because the atoms that so liberally and congenially flock together to form living things on Earth are exactly the same atoms that decline to do it elsewhere. Whatever else it may be, at the level of chemistry life is curiously mundane: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, a little calcium, a dash of sulfur, a light dusting of other very ordinary elements – nothing you wouldn’t find in any ordinary drugstore – and that’s all you need. The only thing special about the atoms that make you is that they make you. That is of course the miracle of life.”

I begin with this delightful introduction from Bill Bryson’s book, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, for he invites us to see our lives from unexpected perspective; to consider the intricate interstitial fabric of life; to give ourselves in awe to the mystery of creation; to smile in gratitude at the gift of life.

Jesus tells us that he’s a shepherd, that he’s our shepherd, that he’s good and keeping an eye out, fending off enemies, leading us to pasture. Jesus tells us that we’re not the only ones; that he’s ever seeking to bring other sheep into the fold, into the reach and embrace of God’s love. Jesus tells us that true love is sacrificial, that the true and good shepherd lays down his life for those whom he loves.

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### DATE

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
Sunday, Apr. 22, 2018

### PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

### VERSES

John 10:11-18 &  
I John 3:16-24

Shortly after Jesus' life, in writing to his own congregation, John extends Jesus' words to his own flock, saying "We know love by this, that Jesus 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. And by this we will know that we are from the truth.... All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us." (1 John 3:16-19, 24)

These words of invitation ... of holy commandment to love ... are given and reach also to us. The truth we are given today is the affirmation of a sacred economy, an economy of relationship in which no one and no thing exists and lives apart from the rest. The flock, the pasture, the sheep in the fold, and those outside, the wolf and the thief, the night-sky, the dawn, and the morning dew, the shepherd, the trillions of atoms bound together for a fleeting lifetime; are all dependent one upon the other.

Jesus' teaching about sheep, good shepherds, and sacrificial love is not a lesson in morality; it is an invitation to reality. Love of one another and love of creation is not an "ought" – a moral obligation or future aspiration; rather it is an affirmation of the true nature of things, a gift; thus, an invitation to wake up, to see, to feel the ways our very life depends upon one another. We disregard this truth at our peril and jeopardize the life of our children's children.

I've just finished a great little book called *Tribe*, by Sebastian Junger.

Junger wonders why so many who have served in the military, seen action under the most dangerous and traumatic circumstances, and returned home, then signed up for a second or third tour. He found that while serving many never felt more fully alive, not because of danger or a common enemy, but because of the absolute dependence upon one another in a shared purpose. The survival of the unit depends upon each person knowing that every other soldier has his or her back; a fierce loyalty is non-negotiable.

In contrast, returning home to all the amenities that give us independence, many found the absence of connection, the absence of care, the absence of common purpose, the independent – "I'll just take care of myself" – attitude to be, literally, deadly. Better by far to be in the midst of life-giving relationship.

Junger tells a story from his college days of hitchhiking across the country. Somewhere outside of Sheridan, Wyoming he'd been on the side of the road for a long time. Pick-up trucks and semis just barreled by, some even threw cans out the window at him. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a lone figure walking up the exit ramp toward him – a disheveled man with matted hair and a limp. Something about him put Junger on alert. The man, a big man, approached.

"Where you headed?"

"California."

"You have any food?"

Junger had just gotten a week's supply, had a gallon of water, and one of those little camping stoves. And he was generous, glad to share what he had with others. But he looked at this fellow and knew that he was about to be robbed.

"I have some cheese," he said. The man looked at him.

"You can't get to California on some cheese. You better take this." And he handed him a little brown paper bag with a sandwich and an apple and a snack, the kind of lunch the church may have given the man earlier in the day.

"I saw you back there at the service station, headed up the ramp, and I thought I ought to come out and see if you were alright."

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That man, Junger marveled, did not simply share his lunch, give me his own lunch; that man took responsibility for me. He saw me and for whatever reason felt concerned, and he took it upon himself, went out of his way to make sure that I was okay.

“We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Amen.