

If you haven't seen the sheep video that has been going around social media this week, you need to see the sheep video. It's good for a gigantic belly laugh, it's good for a little bit of ridiculous fun, it's good if you're in need of an aww that's so sweet moment, it's good if you need a moment to look at your own level of ridiculousness and just say, oh that is totally me. So, your task should you choose to accept it, is to find the sheep video today, and if you choose not to, well, here you go, a description that will never compare to the real thing, but I shall endeavor to do my best.

When this video starts you honestly have no idea what is going on. You just see this mound of dirt and a hand trying to pull *something* out of it that appears to be stuck. Eventually as the video pans out, you realize that the mound of dirt is a trench and what appears to be stuck is a sheep. Like an honest to God sheep is stuck head first in this trench, and it's keeper, it's shepherd if you will is aiming to extract it so it can be free. After a little bit of tugging, like a cork out of a bottle, that sheep pops out of the trench and it is *ecstatic*. It bounds away, practically hopping along this trench and then... Well, then the inevitable happens. This sheep in all its excitement goes to jump back over this trench and of course lands smack dab in the middle of this trench again. Free for all of five seconds and then back to being stuck.

You can't help but laugh at this poor sheep, while also feeling deeply sympathetic for it, because isn't this like the perfect example of the human experience? We get stuck, God pulls us out, and then we just dive right back into the same hole. But here's the thing, while we may *know* this in our heads, it's a whole different thing to experience it in our hearts, to experience it in real, tangible ways. Think about this sheep. It's keeper, it's shepherd may talk to it all the time, may tell it all the time that it's safe, that whatever holes it falls into they will always get them out of it, but let's face it, it's a sheep and a human, the communication isn't going to work. It's only by physically *experiencing* that kind of love and care that the sheep is going to know it's safe, it's cared for, it's tended to. We're the same way. We can hear words of scripture, we can sing hymns, we can repeat ad nauseum that God is there for us, but sometimes, we have to really and truly experience God's presence in order for it to sink in, for us to know and trust it. Sometimes it isn't enough for our heads to think something, we have to see it, feel it, have something to hold onto in order for our whole beings to well and truly understand what that kind of love and presence means.

This was something that Jesus knew intimately. He knew that no matter how much teaching and preaching he did about his mission, about the kingdom of God, people weren't necessarily going to believe it unless they

experienced it. It was one thing to say he had come to heal the sick, it was another thing to actually do it. It was one thing to say that he was the bread of life, it was another to feed 5,000 people on a few meager loaves. It was one thing to tell the disciples that he was their good shepherd who would lay down his life for them, it was another to actually do it. It was one thing to tell them that they should love one another with that kind of love, it was another thing to actually show them what that kind of love looked like.

It seems that the further and further away the early church got from Jesus, the more and more they struggled with remembering this. We know next to nothing about the community of faith that the writer of 1 John was reaching out to, but it seems like they're struggling with this whole love thing. It seems they've forgotten a bit, as they've become more removed from Jesus, just what exactly his love looks like, for them and in their lives. So John just kind of lays it out. He's not harsh, but he doesn't mince words either. He tells them, we all know what love is...love is Jesus laying down his life for us. Love is vulnerability. Love is giving of oneself for others. Love is caring for one another. They know this. It's at the heart and soul of what they believe. They have been given the gospel. Jesus died on the cross for them, that's the kind of overwhelming love God poured into the world, but it seems like they're struggling with what exactly to do with it.

And again, John doesn't sugar coat it. "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 to help?" He then breaks it down like he's talking to tiny tots, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." He does sound a little bit like an incredulous parent. You know what love is, so how on earth are you not doing it? And again, we don't really know what's going on in this community to cause this to be an issue in the letter. Are there reports going around that this community is ignoring needs around them? Has it become known that they're really just giving lip service to their faith but not living it out? We don't know...but what we do know is this...while this community might need this message for some reason, *we* need this message for a whole plethora of reasons.

As Christians we have gotten *really, really* good at words and speeches. We know all the right things to say, all the right postures to assume, we know how to keep things even keel and calm, we know how to comfort or placate with a few well placed verses. Let's face it, we have got the whole lip service faith thing down pat. I go to church every week. I can tell you all the right stories. I pray. I know that God loves everyone. I know God is working in the world. I trust that everything is in God's hands. I know what God calls me to do...but...don't ask me to actually do it. We

have become a people who are far too comfortable with three little words and we assume that they take care of everything—love, grace, hope, the needs of our siblings. Thoughts and prayers. Thoughts and prayers. And don't get me wrong, there is a huge place for prayer and compassion in our lives as Christians, but man oh man have they just become a really good catch all phrase to cover ourselves when we're uninterested in actually *doing* anything even remotely close to the kind of love God calls us to.

We wonder why a whole lot of people in this world look at Christians and the first word that pops into their head is...hypocrites. We say, Jesus laid down his life for his sheep. Jesus is the good shepherd who knows his sheep. But what do we actually *do*? We will shut the doors of our buildings to anyone who doesn't seem like they fit into the kind of mold we expect them to. You're a little different? You look different? Talk differently? Even bring different ideas to the table? And we *say*, Jesus knows his sheep, but you aren't our kind of sheep, so maybe go find some place else where you fit in a little bit better, and do not ask us to listen to you and learn from you so that we can all grow from our differences.

We say, there is no greater love in this world than the love of God, the love of Jesus for all people. But what do we actually *do*? We can all go through our laundry list of people that we have dismissed outright, refused

whole-heartedly to love, to show grace to, all because of the hatred and prejudice we carry in our own hearts. We say, God loves all, except when violence gets perpetrated against transgender kids or adults, and then suddenly that love has all sorts of caveats. We say, God loves all, except when we're asked to step outside of our comfort zones to help people in need, and then love has boundaries. We say, God loves all, except when we disagree with how African-Americans and their allies are expressing their devastation and rage at how flippantly the rest of the world treats their lives, and then we come up with all sorts of excuses and reasons for why they shouldn't get to experience God's love in the same way as the rest of the world, because they didn't voice their pain in a way we find acceptable.

We say that the greatest commandment Jesus gave us is to love one another as he has loved us, a love that was abundant and graceful and limitless. But what do we actually *do*? We treat each other's lives flippantly. We refuse to put others before ourselves. We justify hatred at every turn we possibly can. We worship at the feed of greed and individualism and we build up walls around our hearts, our churches, our faith because we couldn't possibly let the entire kingdom of God into our midst, because sometimes the kingdom of God is messy and dirty and not put together and looks a little rough around the edges, and that just doesn't

present the type of picture we want in the world. We hoard our goods, our money, our resources, and we tell our siblings to pull themselves up by their bootstraps because that's what everyone needs to do to get ahead. We refuse help unless we deem it's deserved. We police how love gets shared. We dictate how people are supposed to believe and express their faith. We leave our siblings stuck in the trench all the while thinking it's enough to just say to them God is with you and we'll pray for you in your stuckness.

It's not enough to say it. We proclaim that we are God's hands and feet in the world, then it needs to be our hands that are pulling each other out of whatever trench we're stuck in. And I know some trenches are too deep for us to solve alone, racism, prejudice, hatred, poverty, we're not going to be able to pull every single person out on our own, but the people around us? The people within our sphere of life? We give them a hand, we can give them something more than thoughts and prayers and silent judgment. We want the church to not only survive, but thrive in the 21st century, then we need to put our actions where our words are. Jesus didn't come just so we had some pithy phrases to throw out at the right time, he came to teach us how to live...together, with and for one another. The time has come for love, not just in lip service to a gospel we have written for ourselves, but in action for a gospel we have learned from our Good Shepherd. **AMEN!!!**