Blessed be our God, the Good shepherd, the king of love who teaches us to care for one another.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Appropriately it has also been designated Pastoral Care Sunday. Jesus as our shepherd provides an image which offers not only a comfort to us but also a model of care for each other. As such it is a perfect day and perfect lectionary to be casting a light on and honoring pastoral care.

I would like to tell you two stories which frame my own pastoral formation and offer a metaphor and an experience which have helped me attempt to understand what Jesus commands us to do: to love one another and what the first letter of John also reminds us:

Anna the metaphor: My first day teaching three year olds many years ago offered its normal challenges: parents hovering, teachers anxious about who was in their class, last minute instructions, and the most important crying children. On this day there was one child who upon entering the classroom from the playground simply had a harder than usual time calming down. As we gathered together in a scrum on the rug he stayed in my lap which of course meant that 15 other children wanted to be there as well. Eventually 14 of the 15 gave up and became occupied, thanks to my assistant, with toys and games etc. But the 15th, a child we will call Anna, gently approached me with the crying child we will call Adam on my lap. Urgently she said Martha you need to get him a band aid quick! I thinking I might have missed something checked for blood. nothing. Why Anna does he need a bandaid? He needs it on his heart. It is broken cuz he misses his mommy. Again, the teacher learns from the child. A simple act of kindness. And....we did get a bandaid and it did calm him. Metaphor for pastoral care: always offer a bandaid to place on the hurt

Lily the experience: I wish I had had that metaphor when I encountered this situation at the age of 16. My grandmother offered my services to a friend whose 8 year old granddaughter was suffering from leukemia. I met Lily on a beach and we played together for several days. When we returned to Baltimore I was invited to her family’s home on several occasions to continue the relationship which was less babysitting (there were lots of them around) than companionship and friendship. One Saturday I remember Lily was particularly low, lethargic and sad. She simply wanted to sleep. I was alone with her in the house while she slept having planned a day of swimming and fun. What was I to DO? Gradually as she slept I realized that I was to DO nothing. I was to sit with her. Sometimes reading aloud but more often just letting her know I was there.
when her father returned and I headed to my car he followed me and placed his arm on mine. You will never know what you have given her!

At sixteen I knew something had passed between us. I knew I had received something profound. And I hoped Lily had as well. It was shortly thereafter that Lily died. It was also the time I began praying the prayer of St Francis daily.

When we come into another’s presence, one who is sad or sick or suffering or lonely or anxious or anything ....we are offered the opportunity to respond in the way I believe God wants us to respond ...with our presence, our full attention, our compassion and love.

This is to lay down one’s life for one another. Yes, I understand that these passages were written with martyrdom and sacrifice in mind. But without comparing or evaluating the depth of one’s pain or different injustices, every time we suspend our egos and fully turn to another with Christ at our side we lay down our life for another.

I rely on these two stories continually. I also hope I build on these stories adding layers of other metaphors and opening my life to a myriad of pastoral moments. They help me think of what pastoral care is...

It is offering a bandaid to another’s heart
It is often silent presence more powerful than words

yet it may also be offering food for the soul
humor for a sad mind
music to an untuned ear
midwifery to a birthing spirit

Having just returned from Stephen Ministry Leader Training I heard many more stories of care but there were a few common threads: God offers cures, we offer care Care-givers are those silent angels who bring Christ’s love to the hurting Ministers show up....just be there!!!

I heard anna stories and lily stories

I am privileged to witness to anna and lily stories everyday in my life at St David’s. As clergy support for Pastoral Care COMmission I continue to be overwhelmed by the care which is offered every day. In a moment I will ask those who offer such care to stand and be recognized. But first I want to thank all of you who sometimes without knowing it offered pastoral care to me in welcoming me into your lives, into this community.

I believe that every encounter is a pastoral opportunity. How we respond to each other is vitally important! When you witness the number of people engaged in caring behavior and then add to it the serendipitous experiences which we might open ourselves to each day, you might realize that all of us...each and everyone of us...is being formed in
God’s image, the Good Shepherd, the King of Love, as we journey in and toward that kingdom space which is the very heart (bandaged perhaps) of Pastoral God.

(ask all ministries to stand and remain standing then ask all to stand as st david’s friends)

May you look into each others’ eyes and see the Good Shepherd and know God and make that known to others in your care. Amen