

“The Shepherd’s Love Welcomes Me”

Over the past months, I have read two short but powerful books by the Irish author Claire Keegan. The books are titled *Foster* and *Small Things Like These*. They are both short, beautiful books.¹ They are quiet, introspective, heartwarming, and heartbreaking. They open to us lives foreign to our own, but which we come to appreciate. I have enjoyed them so much that I have read each of them at least three times. Today, I want to focus on *Foster*.

The story begins in the home of a stereotypically impoverished Irish family. They live in a rundown house in the countryside. There are numerous children, and the mother has another on the way. Dad drinks too much and works too little. We get the sense that he is also a philanderer.

One of their children, a tween-age girl, is the focus of the story. We get the sense that she does not fit in with the rest of the family, with other local children, or with the community at large. She is too quiet, too introverted, and she lives too much in a world of her own. Her parents decide to send her away for the summer to live with a somewhat older couple who are relations but not particularly close ones.

The couple is childless. They have built a simple life on their small farm. They have a good partnership, but it is tinged with sadness. We can sense there is something unsaid that darkens their life, but there are few clues.

The girl arrives at their home disheveled, dirty, and in her one dress. But the girl was proud that her underwear was fresh, even if the rest of her was not. Her father was so eager to be rid of her that he zipped off in the car, forgetting to give the girl her suitcase. She will have to wear hand-me-down boys' clothes.

The couple had readily agreed to take the girl for the summer, but they are conflicted. The wife likes having a girl to dote on and teach her what women’s work on a farm entails. The girl learns to fetch water from a spring, shell peas, make pies, and learn to take care of herself. She is finding a mother in the wife, but she is still distant from the husband.

Then one day, he challenges her to run down the long driveway to get the mail. He times her each day, remarking on her improvements. He then begins including her in his chores in the milking barn. It does not go perfectly, but she has learned the ways of the farm just as she learned the ways of the farmhouse.

Through the efforts and love of the husband and wife, we see the child come alive. Her energy, her curiosity, her adeptness at her chores, and her joy in running for the mail show transformation. Each day, she goes to bed tired from work and daily accomplishments. We see the husband and wife become revitalized, too. They are finding new life as they shepherd this girl.

Through the course of this book, we learn something profound about being a good shepherd. When we speak Psalm 23 as we did today, we are claiming that God is our shepherd. But being so distant from the world of sheep and shepherding, we may

¹ The movie based on *Foster* which is called “The Quiet Girl” is wonderful and beautiful. Whereas the movie based on *Small Things Like These* is hard to understand even if you have read the novella.

not know what we are claiming. Shepherding among people is a metaphorical act. Unlike the shepherd of old, when we speak of shepherding people, the task is simpler and less hazardous. Those who shepherd people are more like tour guides in the sense that their job is to keep the group together. Protecting is minimal to shepherd people, whereas protecting sheep from predators is one of the most important jobs of a shepherd of sheep. Instead of a rod and staff, shepherds of people rely on cute hats, t-shirts, and a flag.

The shepherd of our Psalm and of the Gospel readings is doing more than just providing protection, green grass, pure water, and overflowing cups. They provide an example and a lesson. They are teaching us how to care for one another. They are providing examples of how to be shepherds for each other.

The Kinsellas, the husband and wife in the novel, are expert shepherds, although they do not realize it. They teach this little girl that she has value. She is safe in their care and in their community. She learns what an abundant life is, even in its simplicity. The Kinsellas learn that they, too, can have an abundant life through the love of the little girl.

Too often, we read Psalm 23 or the Good Shepherd scriptures as promises for us. Blessings that we passively receive. The story of the girl and her new family teaches us that while the Lord and Jesus provide for the sheep, we have more agency than sheep. We can receive the guidance and care of the Lord and share it with others. We are able to take the abundant life that Jesus offers and share it with others. When we do, the abundance is more abundant.

There is something about these Irish stories and today's scriptures that brought to mind a poem by George Herbert, poet, orator, and priest. He was one of the mystical poets in 17th-century England along with others like John Dryden, Andrew Marvel, and John Donne. He wrote:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

 'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'

'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.'

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 'Who made the eyes but I?'

 'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'

'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
 'My dear, then I will serve.'

The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, VA

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A
8:00 & 10:30 a.m.
April 26, 2026

'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
So I did sit and eat.²

² George Herbert, "Love" (III). Public Domain.