

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2018

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Psalm 23

John 10:11-18b

The Only Certain Happiness

I am the good shepherd. ... I lay down my life for the sheep.

John 10:11-18b

The gospel reading for today comes from John, chapter 10 beginning at verse 11.

[Jesus said] "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."



Sheep! Michael Ciancia

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. – Psalm 25:4, 5

Our daughter, Sarah is Director of Family Life at First Presbyterian Church of Atlanta. One thing we like to do is compare our Children's Moments. Her Senior Pastor does not like to do them and I love to. So Sarah and I share our Children's Moment ideas and our disasters. "Learn from my mistakes," I tell her, like the time I was trying to explain discipleship.

I said, "Sitting in church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes you a car." Following Jesus is a lifestyle not a locality. In order to be one of Jesus' people you have to worship and serve with his friends. Worshipping God as a Christian is not optional; it's the baseline, but there's more to being a Christian than sitting in the sanctuary. Right?

I really should have left it there. Instead I tried to illustrate the point by putting a kitten that belonged to a friend into a large bird cage. After the kids were assembled on the steps, I had someone carry the cage with the kitten inside it into the sanctuary. Now I *thought* the children would say, “That’s not a bird; it’s a cat!” Then I’d say, “No, it’s not; it’s in a bird cage, so it must be a bird.” (I know; it was a stretch in the first place.) The kids didn’t say, “That’s not a bird, it’s a cat.” Instead, one of the children blurted: “That cat ate your bird!” It was impossible to get it back after that.

Sarah and I have a list of Children’s Moment disasters. So together we have made a KISSS pact. Keep it simple, simple, simple! Don’t use props. They can go so terribly wrong. And always remember, kids are concrete. Abstract thinking doesn’t develop in the human brain until the mid to late teens. Kids don’t get similes and metaphors.

So this is a problem in teaching kids the important lessons of faith. Jesus constantly spoke in similes and metaphors. These metaphors are great for adults; they help us glimpse the unknowable. Jesus described the Kingdom of God as like:

“a king giving a wedding banquet” ...
“a treasure hidden in a field” ...
“a mustard seed” ...
“a net cast into the sea”

In this center section of John’s gospel Jesus echoes the voice of God seven times, saying, “I AM.” This is the Tetragrammaton, the sacred four-letter, Hebrew name of God revealed to Moses, considered to be so holy that to this day many Jews will not pronounce it. Jesus not only pronounces the name, he claims it. Then he completes the statement using metaphors we love. He said:

“I AM the bread of life.”ⁱ
“I AM the light of the world.”ⁱⁱ
“I AM the door.”ⁱⁱⁱ
“I AM the resurrection and the life.”^{iv}
“I AM the true vine.”^v
“I AM the way, the truth and the life.”^{vi}

And here, in chapter 10 of John, Jesus declares, “I AM the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep.”

I expect you know that Jesus wasn’t literally a shepherd; he was a carpenter and a rabbi. Jesus wasn’t literally a shepherd, though there were plenty around. As you drive along the roads in modern day Israel/Palestine you see the Bedouin shepherds tending their sheep on the hillside. The metaphor is a good one, and important because it helps us to understand the saving work of God in Jesus just a bit better. And if we can understand, we can live into our salvation.

But first we need to get rid of the fuzzy, romantic ideas about shepherds that we inherited from Sunday school paintings and Christmas pageants. The truth of the matter is that raising sheep is hard work; it’s a gritty and often thankless job. I knew almost nothing about sheep and

shepherding until some years ago when a church I was serving entered into a mission partnership with a church in the Navajo Nation. It was an amazing opportunity. We were able to live with and worship with the Navajo near the Four Corners region of Arizona.

The Navajo are shepherds; it's what they do. They don't carry sheep around on their shoulders. They transport them in the beds of their F150's.

Here's something else I learned. Sheep stink. (They probably think humans stink, but I'm just sayin', they do.) It's a myth that sheep are stupid. But they are inclined to wander off and get themselves into dangerous situations. The life of a shepherd is particularly hard, because he or she is never off duty. Caring for sheep is around the clock.

A good shepherd in Jesus' day needed to lead his or her flock far up into the hills for green pastures and clear water, then, at night, the shepherd had to create a makeshift corral, using stones and limbs. The shepherd could only sleep when all the sheep and lambs were inside. Wonder if that's where the idiom "counting sheep" comes from? THEN the shepherd would lie down at the opening of the pen. No sheep could escape in the night, and no predator could enter the pen without stepping over the sleeping shepherd. If a wolf wanted to make one of the sheep his dinner, he'd have to eat the shepherd first.

This is similar to the way we adults sleep at Woods Work. Woods Workers stink too (I'm including my own stinkiness in that). Woods Workers stink, but our teens are NOT stupid, just the opposite. Our lambs are VERY bright, and the other adults and I are honored to serve alongside them.

So what is Jesus telling us with this metaphor? The first thing he is saying is that he is in charge. Our first allegiance must always be to him. The sheep cannot choose to follow the shepherd some of the time, when we agree with him, when we feel like it, only when it's raining, or when it's fair. The confession says, "In life and in death we belong to God." Professor Stephen Carter, in his book *The Culture of Disbelief*, said that Christianity is "at its heart, a way of denying the authority of the rest of the world; it is a way of saying to fellow human beings and to the state those fellow human beings have erected, 'No, I will not accede to your will.'"^{vii} "The Lord is my shepherd" means he is in charge. His providence, his grace is sufficient for me. There is no need for other loyalties or chasing after false idols.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. In her sermon, "The Voice of the Shepherd," Barbara Brown Taylor tells of an acquaintance who grew up on a sheep ranch and could dispel the myth that sheep are stupid. It was actually the cattle ranchers that started that rumor, because sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear with shouts and prods from the cowboys. But that does not work with sheep. If you stand behind sheep and make noises, the sheep will run around behind you. They actually prefer to be led. Cows can be pushed. Sheep must be led.

Does that tell you anything about who Jesus wants to be for us? He is our captain and commander. He wants to be our leader. He gave his life for us. We owe him our absolute allegiance. There is no room here for divided loyalties. Either he is the one who goes before us, our shepherd, our leader -- or he is nothing.

It also means that he gives us everything. The author of 1 John wrote:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – therefore 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 to help? ... Let us love, not in word or speech but in truth and action.^{viii}

This is one of many reasons God asks us to give generously to support the church. (I’d be saying this even if it weren’t stewardship season.) The Lord is our Shepherd we have everything we need – and more – enough to share! It is our love, our allegiance to him that causes us to choose his cause rather than our own. It is our allegiance that leads us to him, that leads us to love the ones that he loves, and serve as he served.

We have a Good Shepherd who gave everything for us. Can we really deny him that small portion that he requires of us to do his work in this place?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said:

“When a chap is in love, he will go out in all kinds of weather to keep an appointment with his beloved. Love can be demanding; in fact, more demanding than law. It has its own imperatives. Think of a parent sitting by the bedside of a sick child through the night, impelled by love. Nothing is too much trouble for love.”^{ix}

Another one of my literary heroes, Leo Tolstoy wrote: “The only certain happiness in life is to live for others.” It’s true! It is only when we follow the example of the Good Shepherd, only when we learn his definition of self-emptying love and compassion that we find contentment, the deep happiness that we seek.

A little girl was reciting the 23rd Psalm. She said, “The Lord is my shepherd; that’s all I need.” That’s perfect! Everything we need and enough to share! Studying this psalm in Bible study this week, I asked the group, “What is it about this psalm that so resonates for us.” I don’t know anyone who doesn’t love the 23rd Psalm. Someone wisely answered, “It’s the message of abundance that is here.”

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.... You prepare a table before me...you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

This psalm has the overwhelming tone of enough. God’s love is lavish and sufficient.

I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He laid down his life for us, therefore we ought to lay down our lives for one another. He gives us more than enough, therefore we ought to share, lavishly.

There was a time when former president Jimmy Carter was working in the Philippines on a house for Habitat for Humanity. The house was near the place where the infamous Bataan Death March began. It was a very hot day, and as President Carter and the others worked, they were covered in sweat. The homeowner was later asked what meant most to him about the project. He replied that one day as they worked, he noticed that as President Carter worked with the mortar, some of his sweat fell into the mix. The homeowner said, "I know my walls are blessed with the sweat of President Carter in them." That happens every time one of Jesus' people gives him or herself away for love.

It is easy to make it vexed and complicated, but it's not. Remember Sarah's and my pact: Keep it simple, simple, simple. Keep it concrete. Jesus is our leader, we follow him. Always. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote: "We must be absolutely related to the Absolute and only relatively related to the relative." Our first loyalty has to be to him.

That means we love the things he loves and allow our hearts to break for what breaks his. It means letting go of some of our commitments and interests, all those trinkets and toys, sparkly things that tempt us, things we care about, relative things. Certain happiness comes only from love.

Jesus said, "I know my own and my own know me." Listen to HIS voice! He is the Good Shepherd.

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
to care for all that are close to us,
to protect those who are threatened,
to welcome those who are rejected,
to forgive those who are burdened by guilt,
to heal those who are broken and sick,
to share with those who have little or nothing,
to take the time to really know one another
and love as you have loved us.

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
to spread compassion to those who are far away,
to speak for those who are voiceless,
to defend those who are oppressed and abused,
to work for justice for those who are exploited,
to make peace for those who suffer violence,
to take the time to recognize our connectedness,
and to love as you have loved us.

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
and to be faithful to the calling you gave us
to be shepherds in your name.

ⁱ John 6:35

ⁱⁱ John 8:12

ⁱⁱⁱ John 10:9

^{iv} John 11:25

^v John 15:1

^{vi} John 14:6

^{vii} Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief*, HarperCollins, 1993, 41

^{viii} 1 John 3:16-17

^{ix} Desmond Tutu by Wiley Stephens, "One Life to Give" Day1 radio broadcast, first aired May 7, 2006

^x *ibid*