

The Good Shepherd

John 10:11-18

Jesus frequently talked about the image of the shepherd. It was a part of his heritage and culture. Abraham, the father of the nation, was the keeper of great flocks. Moses tended the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, when God called him into a special service. David was a shepherd boy called in from the fields to be the King of Israel.

The imagery of the shepherd was also part of the literature of the day. Psalm 23 is frequently called the shepherd's psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters."

In the Old Testament, when Isaiah spoke of the coming of the Messiah, he painted this picture, saying: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd! He will gather his lambs into his arms." The tradition of the shepherd was very much a part of the heritage, culture, and literature of Christ.

It all comes more clearly into focus in the New Testament. Jesus once told a story about a shepherd who had 100 sheep, but one of them went astray. The way I see it, a 99% return on an investment is pretty good, but not for a shepherd. Jesus tells us that the shepherd left the 99 to go in search of the one that was lost.

Later, when Jesus addressed a crowd of people, Gospel writer Mark tells us that he had compassion upon them because they were "as sheep without a shepherd."

Throughout the Judeo-Christian faith, then, the image of the shepherd has been stamped on our thinking.

And in our lesson this morning Jesus again taps into this imagery when he refers to himself as the good shepherd. For a few moments, let's consider what he may have had in mind.

First, he was telling us that **we have a shepherd that is a genuine shepherd**. Pastor Larry Daniel is a Civil War buff and tells a story on himself. He says, "I'll never forget when I got my wife's engagement ring. I'd been saving up money from all of the marriages I'd performed and I was going to buy an antique musket--an 1864 U. S. Springfield rifle--oh, it was beautiful.

Instead I used the money to buy an engagement ring. (Greater love hath no man than that). But after I bought the ring, I said to the jeweler—"now, be honest with me. The deal is made. I can't back out of it, and I'm not going to return the ring. But can you really tell the difference between an authentic one carat ring and some phony thing that I can buy on TV?"

And the jeweler said: "come around here and look at this, I want to show you something". He put the light on two rings--the one I had just bought and a phony diamond. Then he gave me his jeweler's eyeglass. He said, "look at this cheap imitation and look at what you just bought," and when I did I was amazed. My ring sparkled. The counterfeit was dull and had no luster.

Jesus said: now here are two shepherds. Outwardly there seems to be no difference. The skin of both has been bronzed by the sun and weathered by the

wind. They both carry a fleece to keep them warm at night. Both carry a shepherd's crook. But one is a genuine shepherd and the other is a counterfeit.

One is a shepherd in his heart; the other is a shepherd in his wallet. On an ordinary day you could never tell them apart. But let trouble come. Let a pack of wolves appear and then the difference comes out. The counterfeit runs, because it's only money to him. He has no ownership. But the real shepherd stays.

Jesus said in our text: I lay down my life for my sheep. That's the difference between the real shepherd and the counterfeit.

Here's the good news: regardless of how much trouble comes your way; the good shepherd never leaves your side, never deserts you in times of trial. That's news that will let you get through the night; that will enable you to keep your sanity.

Second, **he was telling us that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep.** Sir George Adams Smith tells of being in the Holy Land years ago. He saw several different flocks of sheep all huddled together at a watering hole. They all looked alike to him. It was simply a mass of white wool. He wondered how the shepherds would ever separate them out.

At the appropriate time, however, each shepherd gave his own unique call, and in orderly fashion the sheep divided. Perhaps that's what the Good Shepherd meant when he said: I know my sheep and my sheep know me.

The story is told of a census taker who went deep into the hills to gather information. The people in this region were quite poor and not very well educated. He asked the mother how many dependents she had. She began saying, "well there's Rosalie, and Billy, and Lewella, and our dog Willie".

The census taker interrupted her and said: "No ma'am that is not necessary. I just need humans." "Oh", she said. "Well, there's Rosalie, and Billy, and Lewella". Rather exasperated, the census taker interrupted her again and said: "No ma'am, you don't seem to understand. I don't need their names I just need numbers".

The mother innocently replied: "But I don't know them by numbers. I only know them by names."

It comforts me to know that the creator of the world knows me by name. He knows my situation. He knows me.

The real question is whether we're attuned to God's special whisper. I suppose all of us have seen the 1930's painting of a dog, it's head cocked, looking at an old RCA phonograph. The name of the painting is "The Master's voice".

I confess that in my life I've not always recognized my master's voice. I've been too busy, too preoccupied, too self-centered. Other times, frankly, I'm afraid to hear his voice; I know what he'll say and I don't want to hear it. It's important for me to hear once again the words of the Good Shepherd: I know my sheep, and my sheep know me.

The Good Shepherd also includes other sheep. Jesus said: **"I have other sheep too, and they are not of this fold. I must bring them in also."**

Now here's a question. What is an oxymoron? An oxymoron is a combination of contradictory terms, each term seemingly canceling the other out. For example: bittersweet, jumbo-shrimp, authentic-reproduction, House ethics committee, rap music, unruly Presbyterians.

Here's another one: Good shepherd. I say that because in the ancient world shepherding was not considered to be the romantic, humble occupation that we've painted it to be. Shepherds in those days were gypsies. They were dirty; they were thieves. They were so despised that under Jewish law a shepherd could not be a witness in a trial. Shepherds were notorious liars.

Just when we think we've got those dirty shepherds figured out, Jesus throws us for a loop and uses the term "good" to describe them. That's because, in God's flock, there are going to be many people present that you didn't expect.

Jesus is saying, "there are some people who are not of my fold (and at that moment he's speaking of the Gentiles) and I must bring them in too".

In John Drinkwater's historical drama Abraham Lincoln, a woman says to Lincoln: "Mr. President, have you heard the good news? In the latest battle we suffered 800 casualties and the enemy 2700. How splendid."

"Splendid," replied Lincoln, "that 3500 souls are lost?" "Oh, Mr. President," she said, "you must not look at it in that way. Only 800 of them counted". Replies Lincoln: "Madam, the world is much bigger than your heart."

The Good Shepherd includes other sheep. And **the good shepherd sacrifices**. Jesus said it this way: The shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Lay down your life for a worthless animal!? It hardly seems reasonable, until we remember that we're the sheep he's talking about. We're the worthless ones. Theologically it's called atonement-- shedding blood on behalf of another who doesn't deserve it.

The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

I believe that a life is not worth living if it isn't aligned with a cause worth dying for. If we truly follow the shepherd model shown to us by Christ, then sacrifice must be a part of our faith. And the church must lay down her life for a worthless and undeserving society.

It's not enough that we simply remain sheep. Christ calls us to become shepherds.

Jesus asked Simon Peter one day: "Peter, do you love me?" "Lord", he replied, "you know that I do love you". Then, came the reply, "feed my sheep".

If we are to be faithful, there is no alternative. Amen.