

“The Good Shepherd”
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John 10:11-18

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Next month, I’ll be flying out to Idaho to attend our annual meeting of “the Boys.” We’re a group of five ministers, most of whom attended college and seminary together, and have served Presbyterian churches for the past forty years. Thus, there’s a special bond there, one in which we share a lot of history between us. Well, several years ago during one of our annual get-togethers, Phil--my roommate from seminary--was giving me a grand tour of Boise, the capitol of Idaho where he has lived and pastored for the past three decades. He told me to hop in his truck as he wanted me to see what the city and surrounding country-side looked like when viewed from a higher elevation. As we drove up into the hills, we were forced to make a sudden stop as we encountered thousands of sheep as far as the eye could see blocking the road before us. There were a couple of shepherds present but the majority of the work was being performed by a number of sheepdogs working in tandem with one another. It was an amazing sight to see as they kept the giant flock together, forcing them to keep moving ahead of us. Phil explained to me that this was not an uncommon sight as at certain times of the year, the sheep were led further up into the mountains because the grass was greener and the water more abundant then.

To be honest, I have to admit that I was more than a LITTLE envious of those shepherders and the simpler life they seemed to enjoy. The image of a shepherd tending his sheep evokes for us images of a time when life seemed so much more down-to-earth, where people felt more connected to nature and the land than they do TODAY. I think that’s why Psalm 23 continues to retain such universal appeal. For an agrarian society like Israel’s, shepherds were a common sight- the equivalent today of a family farm, you might say. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all shepherders as well as Moses and David. God is called “the Shepherd of Israel” some eighty times, which causes Isaiah to declare, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd, he shall gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.” Meanwhile, those who FAILED to care for them would incur God’s wrath, causing Isaiah to lament, “They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain,” and Ezekiel, “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?”

If you’ve ever seen or worked with sheep, then you know they are extremely helpless animals, that they are completely reliant upon the shepherd for their survival. Unlike goats, they are not good foragers and do not adapt well to the wild. Unless they are led to where there is food and water, they could easily perish. In addition, sheep are incredibly stupid. They have difficulty staying together or being guided through gates. Because their eyesight is so poor, they are dependent on the shepherd’s voice- a point Jesus made when he said that the sheep know the shepherd’s voice.

In our New Testament lesson, the FIRST point Jesus makes is that he is the “good shepherd” who lays down his life for the sheep. Contrary to our initial impression, there was really NOTHING idyllic about this occupation. Regardless of how bad the weather was, he had

to be out in the open fields with them, making sure they were safe, secure, and well cared for. He had to know where each sheep was at all times, and if one WAS missing, he would leave the ninety and nine in order to find it and bring it back. What MAKES him “good” is that he LOVES his animals, SO MUCH so that he is willing to fight to the death in order to protect them. They always had to be on the lookout for wild animals which were attracted to the sheep’s bleating. Thus, a shepherd’s life had its share of dangers.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, contrasts himself here with the hireling who has NO such relation to the sheep. The “hired” worker did not own them but was simply paid to look after them. In the event of extreme danger, his thought was not to protect his flock but to look after his OWN life first. Thus the hireling had no real love for them at all; HIS concern was getting paid for his labor and nothing more. The one whose interest is primarily in his pay will always react differently from the person whose interest is foremost in the sheep. Hence, the difference between the “good” shepherd and the “hired” workman was the difference between a calling and a job. To the shepherd, those sheep were not mere bundles of wool and pieces of meat to be bought and sold at the local market. They were objects of his tender love and he invested every moment of his time in making sure they were cared for in every way.

I will admit that my greatest fear in ministry is if I were to ever begin to think and act like a “hired” workman for the church instead of the “good shepherd” I was originally commissioned by Christ to be. You see, they are the type of ministers or church workers who only serve the Body of Christ between the hours of nine and five, five days of the week. Once their timecard is punched, they make it clear that any time AFTER that they are not to be disturbed. They’ll only do as much as is asked of them or what their job descriptions state and no more. They are far more interested in how much they are going to be compensated for their time and labor than how much they have ALREADY received for the sheer honor of serving God and his Church. You can always tell whom the hirelings are for to them, their work is fundamentally a JOB rather than a sacred calling, more DRUDGERY than joyous service.

But such a calling is not limited just to the ministry. During my former pastorate in Iowa, we had some farmers in the congregation. From them, I learned how the BEST farmers were those who practiced a philosophy of responsible land management. For instance, the Sages are descended from a long line of farmers and I heard Jim repeat many times a quote he had learned from his father years earlier, “Live as though you’re going to die today; farm as though you’re going to farm forever.” He believes that when you farm, you don’t do it merely for short-term profit which can often deplete the nutrients in the soil but you do so with an eye to the future and preserving it for subsequent generations. Jim has told me he could easily substitute his present crop for another and generate a higher profit for himself but in the interests of what he feels is a more RESPONSIBLE policy, he has steadfastly REFUSED to do so. Their pigs and cattle, corn and soybean operation represents far more than just dollars and cents to them but stewardship at its BEST. As they made very clear, their farm isn’t just a job to them- it is a WAY OF LIFE; it is a noble vocation into which they’ve invested much of their heart and soul and FROM which they’ve derived a livelihood and much personal fulfillment. The Sages certainly showed ME what it meant to be “good shepherds” by their example.

In my former pastorate in Syracuse, N.Y., the organ, which was installed almost thirty

years ago at a price tag of four hundred thousand dollars, was made in Montreal, Canada by an organ maker named Karl Wilhelm. Karl, who learned his trade in Germany before emigrating to Canada in the late 1950's, is foremost a craftsman who personally oversees every aspect of their construction and installation. I came to know Karl during his annual trips to Syracuse to oversee the condition of our organ and over the years, he has built almost two hundred of them which can be found in churches, universities, and concert halls all throughout North America. He regards each one as though it was his own "child" and he PERSONALLY returns to inspect and maintain them, making sure that they're properly cared for and not abused. He told me about one church in Connecticut he had visited that had terribly neglected their organ and that he had confronted the minister about it with words that can't be repeated from this pulpit- such is the love and passion he has for his work and profession. Karl Wilhelm is no hireling but a "good shepherd" in every sense of the word.

SECONDLY, Jesus says he knows his sheep and his sheep know HIM. Where to others, sheep may look indistinguishable from one another, HE can identify them at a glance. He can pick them out at once from a mass of other sheep because they are HIS; they BELONG to him. This knowledge is a result of love for when you love someone, you discover that you want to know everything you can about that person. For instance, I'm forever asking Rose, my wife, about various events in her life as well as her family. She'll often say, "Well, why do you want to know?" and my answer is always the same, "When you love someone, you want to know everything you can about that person- every detail becomes meaningful and thus is never too minor or incidental." Well, Christ's knowledge is borne out of such devotion to each one of US. Because he LOVES us so, he desires to know our every worry as well as our every joy, our every trouble as well as our every achievement- and he DOES! "I know my OWN!" he says.

And THIRDLY, Jesus says he has sheep also in need of protection that are NOT of this fold. Here he was obviously speaking of the Gentiles. Like US, he knows THEIR hearts, THEIR minds, THEIR needs, and as he so generously opens his arms to gather US in, so will he do for OTHERS who do not yet know him. Once again, we see how deep and wide and broad his love is, that where we are always building walls and segregating ourselves from others, he is busy tearing them down and removing every barrier. With Christ, there is no Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are ALL one in him. In Christ there is no young nor old, rich nor poor, black nor white, straight nor gay for he loves us all EQUALLY; we are ALL his brothers and sisters. And when he calls to them, they TOO instinctively know "their master's voice." They sense that he accepts THEM, that he will heal THEM, and that he will make THEIR lives whole even as he has OUR OWN.

Now I have to pause for a second and make an admission which might seem strange in light of everything I have already said about sheep. It is that "sheep" are not one of my favorite animals and thus, not one of my favorite METAPHORS, ESPECIALLY for the Church. I displayed my prejudice earlier when I said that sheep are uniformly stupid, docile, and defenseless little creatures. And yet, what Christ is asking us to become is not some mindless, passive, submissive puppet who is unable to think or act for him or herself. Rather, he wants us to experience the same kind of peace of heart and mind and soul that comes when we discover there is a "good shepherd" watching over and caring for US- one willing to lay down his life for US in order to PROTECT us. FURTHERMORE, as a good shepherd, he knows each of us by

name and keeps a constant eye on us lest we ever become lost or easy prey to others. And if one DOES, then he will leave the ninety and nine for the sake of the one so as to find and restore that person back to the rest. FINALLY, as any good shepherd will, his love is SO great that when he hears of OTHER sheep that are in danger, he will seek THEM out and save THEM as well. When we discover that this “good shepherd” is more than just a charming metaphor but a LIVING REALITY and that his name is JESUS CHRIST, then we TOO can enjoy that same rest and joy and peace in our OWN lives; we TOO can know that SAME fullness of life that Christ experiences in his OWN relationship with the Father.

Of course, it has often been objected that the human need to look to someone or something “out there” to come to our aid and save or protect us says more about OURSELVES than it does about any God, that it is to admit to our own frailness and insecurity. It is to confess that our need for God serves as a crutch in life because we are far too weak to stand on our own two feet and fend for ourselves. It is to acknowledge that without a “good shepherd” to watch over us, we are helpless to care for ourselves, vulnerable to any and all forms of prey. For instance, in his book *The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud described belief in God as a collective neurosis which he labeled a “longing for a Father.” He saw God as nothing more than a human projection. He reasoned that as we grow up, we discover our earthly fathers are not able to give us all the answers in life or to protect us from what is a very dangerous and scary world. To deal with our fears, we created the concept of God by projecting up into the sky a sort of super-human figure to compensate for our terrible sense of inadequacy. Therefore, what we call “God” is in fact nothing more than an illusion or human projection growing out of a deeply held desire for an all-knowing and an all-powerful benevolent father who will take care of us. For many atheists and agnostics, Freud offers a very persuasive explanation as to the origin of “God” and why the idea of the “fatherhood of God” maintains such a powerful hold over us.

I, however, prefer the explanation offered by C. S. Lewis who reasoned that rather than a sign of weakness, this continual “longing” for God might actually speak to us of ANOTHER reality that is HIGHER and GREATER than ourselves and the world we presently inhabit. He believed that for every natural desire, there exists some real object that can satisfy that desire. As he wrote in *Mere Christianity*:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for these desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire; well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

For Lewis, our desire for God seemed to provide evidence that God DOES exist. God is not some human contrivance to help us overcome our most basic fears concerning the uncertainties of life and the inevitability of our own death. Rather, God is the One whom we are ultimately yearning for in all our pursuits. Each of us harbors within us a deep and persistent longing for relationship with the One who created us in the FIRST place and whose image we now bear. This was the same argument made by St. Augustine more than fifteen hundred years ago in his *Confessions* when he declared: “You have made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.”

While working on some project whether around the house or at the church, I can often be heard singing to myself. And usually it's the SAME song- a tune I've been singing over and over again for many years, the lyrics of which never seem to leave my head. Often I find myself singing it and I don't even REALIZE it- it just HAPPENS as though there was some unconscious need to let it out. It was written by George and Ira Gershwin in 1926 for a Broadway musical named *Oh, Kay!* It's an old standard which I know most of YOU are familiar with AS WELL. It's called "Someone to Watch Over Me" and it's been performed by just about every major singer from Frank Sinatra to Linda Ronstadt. The words go like this:

*There's a somebody I'm longing to see
I hope that he turns out to be
Someone who'll watch over me
I'm a little lamb who's lost in the wood
I know I could always be good
Someone who'll watch over me*

*Although he may not be the man some
Girls think of as handsome
To my heart he carries the key
Won't you tell him please to put on some speed
Follow my lead, oh, how I need
Someone to watch over me*

My friends, I'm convinced that MORE than just a song, those lyrics are a personal confession as to my own inadequacy as a human being. In fact, I'm convinced those words express the highest longing and deepest need of EVERY human heart which is why I can't help BUT sing it over and over again. It is a desire each of us has deep within our OWN soul- to know that someone loves us and promises to watch over us every minute of every hour of every day; someone who has our best interests at heart, even after knowing what craven and selfish creatures we all are; someone who can protect us when we haven't the strength or wherewithal to protect ourselves. This isn't merely wishful thinking on our part- a Freudian projection of our need for a "super daddy" to hold our hand when we are lonely or afraid. Rather, it IS the intuitive belief that Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, represents the ANSWER, the FULFILLMENT to that need. And I promise that if you listen intently for his voice and learn to TRUST it, then you TOO just might discover that that same one who promises to watch over ME NO LESS watches over YOU so that you TOO may find YOURSELVES singing that very same song again and again AS WELL. Let us pray...

Almighty God and Everlasting Father, draw each of us close to you this morning that we might find the rest we all so desperately yearn for- rest from our worries, rest from our sorrows, rest from our anger, rest from our jealousies, rest from our loneliness, rest from our guilt, rest from our despair. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil for you assure us that you are with us; with your rod and your staff, you comfort us. Help us to believe this and live our lives by this truth. In the name of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, we pray. Amen.