

The Good Shepherd — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: John 10:11-18

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 04-25-2021

The Fourth Sunday of Easter in the Church Calendar is known as the Good Shepherd Sunday. If you have been in churches that follow the church calendar or the Lectionary, chances are you have heard sermons about the Good Shepherd many times.

In one sense, that is great because you might already be familiar with the Scripture passages. In another sense, it might be hard to hear something new and fresh in a sermon on these passages.

As I read today's text, listen closely and see if there is something you might not have noticed before in the words.

In John, Chapter 10, verses 11-18, Jesus tells his disciples and the crowd gathered (which included some of the religious leaders of the day),

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The 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. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I 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. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No 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.”ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

Often, when we read a specific passage of Scripture on a given day, we may not place the passage in the context of the prior or subsequent passages.

Today’s text is part of a larger encounter that Jesus has with people gathered on the Sabbath. Several weeks ago, during Lent, the Sermon focused on John 9 and the story of the healing of the man born blind. When that man identified Jesus as who had healed him, he was eventually thrown out of the Synagogue.

In the verses between that event and today’s text, Jesus first identifies himself as the gate for the sheep. Today’s text is a continuation of the story. Jesus continues his teaching in light of the actions of the religious leaders.

We can assume that all of those gathered around that day, would have understood the metaphor of the Good Shepherd.

In the Old Testament, the Good Shepherd was God. This image of the Good Shepherd is found in our first text for today, Psalm 23.

The understanding of God as the Good Shepherd is especially evident in Ezekiel 34, where the Good Shepherd was contrasted with the bad shepherds, the kings and leaders of Israel, who had not taken care of God's people.

The people and religious leaders gathered on this day would have been shocked to hear Jesus say that HE is the Good Shepherd. It is not surprising when you read the rest of John 10 to find that the religious leaders tried to stone Jesus for his perceived blasphemy- claiming that he is God.

Let's look more closely.

What is it that Jesus says, specifically?

Jesus compares himself as the Good Shepherd with the "hired hand" – the shepherd who just takes a job watching the sheep. The hired hand is not the person who owns and cares deeply for the sheep. When dangers arise, the hired hand would abandon the sheep to protect himself.

Jesus is basically saying that the religious leaders are nothing more than the hired hand-type shepherd. They really are not concerned about the needs of the people, just their own positions.

Look at verses 14 and 15.

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

Jesus is not mincing words here. He is flat out claiming to be the Son of God. He is also preparing his followers (and the readers of the Gospel of John) to know that he will give up his life for his followers.

Look at verses 17 and 18 (we will come back to verse 16 in a minute). Jesus continues the theme of verses 14 and 15 by saying,

¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No 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.”

Jesus has expanded his prediction of giving up his life to include that he will then take it up again – he *will* die, *but* he will be resurrected. Verse 18 foreshadows the conversation that Jesus will have with Pontius Pilate, where Pilate claims to have the power of life and death where Jesus is concerned.

Jesus tells Pilate that he only has that power because God had given it to him and that it was planned to be that way.

Here Jesus says that he, Jesus, *willingly* will give up his life and will be raised back to life, according to the will of God. These are powerful, confrontational words.

Knowing the background of this text, I might find it to be a little less of the poetic, comforting passage I had come to experience when reading it in the past.

And what about the sheep? I have always been given the impression that sheep are dumb animals. It turns out that while they may not be as smart, as say, dolphins, they are not dumb, either.

In her sermon "The Voice of the Shepherd," Barbara Brown Taylor tells of an acquaintance who had actually grown up on a sheep ranch and could dispel the myth that sheep are dumb. It was actually the cattle ranchers who 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 making noises, they will just run around behind you. They actually prefer to be led.... "Sheep seem to consider their shepherds parts of the family, and the relationship that grows up between

the two is quite exclusive. They develop a language of their own that outsiders are not privy to.”ⁱⁱ

It IS still comforting to know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. That Jesus is the one who speaks and that HIS sheep hear HIS voice and follow.

Knowing more about the actual behavior of sheep, I am much happier to be compared to and included with Jesus' sheep.

Which brings me back to verse 16.

Before I get too comfortable with my self-identification as one of Jesus' sheep and thinking that as one of Jesus' sheep, I can know or identify others who are Jesus' true followers ... Jesus tells those gathered on that day by the synagogue and Jesus tells us,

¹⁶ I 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.

Who are these other sheep?

Jesus is speaking to a Jewish audience. One could assume that Jesus is just referring to the inclusion of Gentiles into the sheepfold. Is it limited to the Gentiles only?

What does this verse say about our penchant for dividing up into separate groups (or denominations)? What about people

who believe, or worship differently than we do? What about the people who do not claim Christianity at all? Could they be part of this group of other sheep?

This one verse can raise a multitude of questions. So many questions that our heads might spin.

SHEW!

Rather than get hung up on those questions, perhaps it would do us better to remember that our life and our faith is about **the Shepherd** and listening to the Shepherd's voice!

“John makes it clear that the work of gathering the flock belongs to Jesus and God – we are to provide a space where all are welcome.”

Jesus tells us in this passage that he willingly will give up his life and will be raised back to life, according to the will of God. As Easter people this is what we believe happened and claim as the cornerstone of our life and our faith.

As Easter people, our response to the gift of God in Jesus Christ is to provide a space for people to be able to hear and respond to the voice of the Shepherd.

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May we be people that provide such a space.

Please pray with me.

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 recognise our connectedness,
and to love as you have loved us.

Good Shepherd,
Teach us to follow you
and to be faithful to calling you gave us
to be [*your sheep and*] shepherds in your name.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word, Fourth Sunday of Easter, page 450.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2011/05/prayer-for-good-shepherd-sunday.html>. By John van de Laar, © 2009 Sacredise on his Sacredise.com website.