

Good Shepherds
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton, NC
April 30, 2023

John 10: 1-10

The Bible is full of discussion of sheep. There are shepherds and flocks all over the place. Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Laban were all rich men with lots of sheep. Even the poor had some sheep. Not everyone had become a farmer or vinedresser. Many people raised sheep. The most famous normal shepherd is David. The most famous metaphorical shepherd is Jesus.

The shepherds were present at Jesus' birth. Were they nice guys or not? I once preached on this, talking about how the shepherds were like the motor cycle gang members of the ancient world: they were nice enough, in their own circles, but they were pretty much rejected by society. And so I talked about how the shepherds watching over their flocks on Christmas Eve were not accepted by society or the temple. They were one step above criminals.

After the sermon Dr. Jim Outhouse, the world's expert on sheep, hurried over to talk to me. He propped himself up on his cane and looked at me. He said, "Well, I don't know where you got your information, but the shepherds had to be gentle, you see, or the sheep would have nothing to do with them!" And then he turned and left. I determined not to preach about anything agricultural or animal related for the rest of my time there!

So maybe the shepherds were like criminals, or maybe not, but either way, they were gentle with the sheep. That is a good point.

One bitterly cold night in seminary we were involved in a live nativity scene. There was a sheep and a donkey, and some youths. Well, at the end of this bitterly cold evening, it was time to put the animals back in the garage behind the church, where they would stay for the night. Nothing we could do would convince this sheep to move. There was some old frozen snow on the ground, and some ice on the driveway, and he was reluctant to move. Finally we just grabbed his wool and said, "let's go," and began to run. His little legs were stuck straight out, his feet sliding on the ice, as we forced him to move. Sheep, you see, are stupid. They are stubborn. And given the chance, sheep will wander off and get lost.

There is a great scene in the old movie, "Far From the Madding Crowd," in which a man falls asleep while watching his sheep. A dog gets loose, and jumps into the sheepfold. He begins barking and chasing the sheep. They break the fence, and run down the hill – AND FALL OFF THE CLIFF INTO THE OCEAN. Sheep are, in a word, dumb.

Thus it is really no surprise that the Bible clearly uses sheep as a metaphor for us. For you and me. We tend to exhibit the same blind dumb wandering as sheep do. Even if

ours is metaphorical at times, we still do it. In fact, the scripture says, “all we like sheep have gone astray.” We have sinned, wandering off the path like some dumb sheep.

Jesus says he is the Good Shepherd. The Perfect Shepherd. He is the one who will not fail, will not neglect, will not ignore, will not go to sleep and let the sheep run astray. He will not be distracted, nor will he simply shrug as the sheep wander off.

The hired hand runs away. He doesn't care for the sheep. Why should he? Why would he fight the wolves; let the sheep die and save yourself! The hired hand is in this for the money, and nothing more. He is certainly not going to sacrifice himself for the sheep. He doesn't feel responsible for them. Or if he does, it is only up to a point.

But the Good Shepherd cares. Typically in a sheepfold, several flocks would be put in and the gate shut. One of the shepherds would sleep at the door, keeping watch that nothing happened to the sheep. Then the other shepherds would come and call for their flock. Each sheep knew the voice of the shepherd, and would come when called. The Good Shepherd knows the sheep, knows his sheep, and they know him. They come when he calls. He tends to them and cares for them, for each one with its particular needs.

The Good Shepherd cares. We go off astray, wandering around. We do things that we know Jesus doesn't like. We get angry at each other, take advantage of each other, slight each other. We treat each other as if we alone are important and they are not. We have a multitude of sins.

Even when we try to treat our sisters and brothers in the Church with the love of God, we sometimes therefore treat those who are not in the Church as outsiders who have no value. And of course they have value! But we judge by appearance, by education, by family name. We judge people worthy or not, but we don't use the same standards as God, who judges by the heart. God judges by how close to Jesus people are, and whether they are trying to get closer or not. And so we need to treat everyone that way!

At times – well, most of the time – we try to leave the flock. We know a better route. We know a better way. We have our own ideas about things. We know better than the authors of scripture, or even the Holy Spirit who stands behind them. We have it together, and so we are off on our own. And the Shepherd, Jesus the Good Shepherd, tries to get us to come back. The Shepherd tries to get us back into the flock. He calls us, he woos us, he seeks to lure us back. At times he will block the path, or even whack us on the nose.

Dr. Allen, my seminary professor, was teaching a group of us outside once, and he began to berate this first year student for trying to be smarter than he was. There was an embarrassed silence, as we all stared at the ground. Finally an older fellow, in his 50s!, who was there said, “It is OK, Dr. Allen; we all know you are not the most pastoral fellow around.” We couldn't believe he actually said that, even though it was true! Allen replied, “pastoral. Pasture, pastor, shepherd. Tell me, does the good shepherd always pat the sheep on the back, or does he sometimes whack the sheep on the nose?” I never forgot that question.

You see, the Good Shepherd will do whatever it takes to get us back into the flock, into the fold, safe in his keeping. He will do whatever he needs to, even laying down his life for the sheep. And that is what Jesus does, he lay down his life for us, so that we can receive forgiveness of sins, healing of what is wrong with us, and new life in his name and in his presence.

Dr. Allen again: he once asked us, when we saw someone we didn't like, to remind ourselves that there goes a person for whom Christ would have died even if I had never been born! The world doesn't need me, doesn't need any of us, but it does need Jesus, and so every person in it is a person for whom he died. So the death of Jesus is not my personal possession – it is not for me, for us, that he died, but for the world. And so, how can we deny the world the love that he shares with us?

If that is done for us, if Christ died for us, then we ought to lay down our lives – our privilege, our whatever, -- for others. That is very hard to do!

It doesn't have to be so stark. We don't have to give up our lives, thought we might. We don't have to give up our lives, but we do have to adopt an attitude that is welcoming, friendly, caring. We have to learn to reach out to and respond to others with the dignity that Christ Jesus would have had. Can we give them respect and dignity even if they are not as well-off as we are?

That's what is so amazing about what we did yesterday, with Lutherans and Rotarians and school children: we packed 20000 bags of food, of rice and soy and proteins. Each bag will feed a family of six. A box of these will feed a school child for an entire year. It only took us two hours to pack all of this. Rise Against Hunger makes it fun, but the results are life-changing for people in far-off places. We will never really know whose life we saved by giving up two hours of our Saturday.

You see, when love acts, God is there. When love acts, we abide in God, we live in God's presence, and God abides in us. And so let us love one another, the way that the Good Shepherd loves us –always looking after the other's needs, taking care of the other's problems, praying for and with the other in times of distress, making time for the other even when we don't want to, caring for the other above our own needs. Let us love that way, even laying down our lives, our time, our money, our energy, our selves for these others, who need to know that God loves them deeply. When we do that, the Spirit abides in us, and we live in the Spirit!

Thanks be to God! Amen.