

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

What Makes for a Good Shepherd and Good Sheep?

John 10:11-18

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep 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 are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

If you had to hire a shepherd for your flock, what qualities would you look for? Do you even know? I sure don't. Not beyond punctuality and dependability. But specific to the job of shepherd, what makes for a good one? I checked some job sites thinking there might be a posting with job requirements and applicant qualifications but couldn't find any for shepherds. At least not in this part of the country. Maybe not even in this country. It's just not in our experience.

Certainly, we have perceptions of the job, gathered mostly, I suppose, from the Bible. It would be helpful if a prospective shepherd loved being outdoors, and didn't mind being alone. They'd also need to know where the green pastures are, and how to use a shepherd's staff. But beyond that, I don't really know for sure.

Here's what Jesus said makes for a good shepherd: "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep" (John 11:10-13).

Last month I flew to Florida for a CEF Board meeting. I also had to do a fair amount of driving all over the state while there, so I rented a car. When I pulled into a gas station after driving for a couple hours and after sliding the credit card in to the pump, I noticed how dirty the car was for such a nice sunshiny day! Just then the pump asked if I wanted a car wash. You better believe I did! A nice new car. A whole state of clear blue skies and bright, warm sunshine to drive it around in. Who wouldn't want a car wash? "Oh wait!" I said to myself just before I pushed the yes button, "It's a rental. I'm not going to wash a rental car." Not for \$8.00. I wouldn't wash one if it was free. I don't care about it like I do my own car.

You get what Jesus was saying about what makes for a good shepherd? He cares. Even more than \$8.00 worth. Jesus cares so much he laid down his life for the sheep – for us -, sacrificing himself unto death to protect us and spare us from the same. "I know my sheep" (John 10:14), Jesus said later in the text. That means he not only knows us by name, but he also knows how defenseless we are when sin, death and Satan attack us. He knows our deepest fears, our nagging guilts, our most profound worries, and so as a good shepherd would, he saved his sheep even though it meant he had to sacrifice himself to do it.

Now I've got to believe that with all the sheep in Israel over the years – Remember our Lenten Old Testament sacrifice series and millions of animals needed just to keep it stocked and going? - I've got to believe it wasn't entirely unheard of for shepherds to occasionally die trying to protect their flocks from wolves. In fact, from the Old Testament record we know there was a time when not only wolves roamed Palestine, but also lions and bears. The shepherd David killed one of each in defense of his father's sheep (1 Samuel 17:34-37). Certainly, over the years, some shepherds died trying. And certainly, they were honored and remembered as good shepherds. But not a single one of them, including David, ever did what Jesus did: after laying down his life for the sheep, he took it up again. It's his rising from the dead that elevates Jesus from being a good shepherd to being the Good Shepherd.

Good not in the sense of being a noble memory or a valiant example. But good in the sense of being effective on a level no shepherd other can achieve. Jesus is our living Lord, risen triumphant over our own graves, and so he still forgives our own sins by his blood and still keeps the devil at bay. No one else can translate their caring into such completely effective and saving action as he shepherds you through this life into the green pastures and quiet waters of the next. This is what makes Jesus your Good Shepherd.

But now let's say you are a shepherd looking for a flock to keep. What would you be looking for in the sheep?

That's the other thing we need to talk about on Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus has something to say about this too. "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (John 10:14,15a). Good sheep know their Good Shepherd well. "Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father," Jesus said. You can't know Jesus if you don't know about him. And so, this congregation teaches people about Jesus from cradle to grave in addition to the worship services of the church. There's Toddler Time, Preschool, Sunday School, Wednesday School, Vacation Bible School, Catechism, Youth Center, teen Bible studies, activities and trips. It seems to me that if you don't know your Good Shepherd well by the time you are confirmed here in eighth grade, it's not because he wasn't interested in you, it's because you weren't all that interested in him.

Jesus also says about his sheep, "They ... listen to my voice" (John 10:16). Good sheep don't close their ears to what their shepherd says. They don't let it go in one ear and out the other. They listen to his voice. That is, they pay attention to it, focus on it, take it seriously, take it to heart, and put it into practice. They also know where to listen for his voice. Not in the wind. Not in the sunshine. Not deep down inside themselves; not in feelings or in unexpected sensation. For the Good Shepherd has never promised to speak in mystical and mysterious ways any more than he has promised to speak through prevailing opinion and public polls. What I hear most people saying are things like, "It seems to me ... Well, I just feel ..." to explain their actions, attitude and points of view. Precious few say, "Because the Bible says ... I think/feel/or did this." Good sheep know their Good Shepherd and they listen to his voice.

According to Jesus there's one more thing that characterizes good sheep. He said, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). The "other sheep" Jesus is talking about are you and me, believers who weren't of the nations of Israel. The New Testament calls them Gentiles. Notice what the Good Shepherd wants to do with them, with us. He wants us to be in a flock, the one flock which the Creed calls "the one holy Christian and apostolic Church." It's the invisible gathering of all those who put their trust in Christ's death and resurrection for their forgiveness, life and salvation.

The presence of Word and Sacraments in the congregations we can see and be a part of in this life is evidence that members of that the one universal flock are present in them as well. Good sheep understand the importance of congregating in these visible flocks like Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church, because they understand they can't go it alone. They need the help and support of other Christians. In nature the ones that go their own way apart from the flock or herd are the ones that first fall victim. It's no different for Jesus' sheep. There's safety in numbers, because those numbered among the flock of God look out for and pray for each other, even encourage and admonish one another with the Good Shepherd's own Words. There can be strength in numbers too, as the sheep gratefully pool their time, talent and treasure in first-fruits offerings to Jesus for doing his gathering work through this and other pens around the world.

In the end it's really not important for us to understand the responsibilities and qualifications of the shepherding profession. It's enough to know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he cares in a way that no one else could: he laid down his life and took it up again in order to make us his good sheep. And that's why we want to know him, listen to him and flock together with those who want to do the same.

Amen.

Prayer of the Day

M: O Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Good Shepherd who laid down your life for the sheep. Lead us now to the still waters of your life-giving Word that we may abide in your Father's house forevermore; for you live and reign with him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: **Amen.**

Prayers of the Church

M: p. 32

Special requests

- Comfort and hope of the resurrection for the Brussow's as Jonathan's funeral is/was this weekend.