

The Good Shepherd
John 10:11-18
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Three thousands of years ago as the Israelites reflected on God's personality, there was the image of the Good Shepherd to counter balance the prevailing image of the remote God living on mountain tops surrounded by thick billowing clouds of smoke. So, the ancient Hebrews came to understand God as being both omnipotent and personal.

Unfortunately, most of us instinctively respond to that remote and exacting image of God. Even after Jesus proclaimed himself the Good Shepherd who willing lays down his life for his sheep, we still see God being primarily distant and foreboding. We mistake the phrase "God fearing" to mean God is to be feared, not realizing the word "fear" in this context really means being awed by God's majesty and power.

Maybe we need to memorize and repeat the mantra "God is love," (found in 1 John 4:16). True, God can't abide our sin, and Judgment Day is fast approaching, but God's judgment is tempered with the same love that drove God to send his son to die for our salvation.

Since we're celebrating Holy Communion today it's helpful to reflect on that image of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. It's also helpful to recall Christ's dual role: the Shepherd who became the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

It may seem odd mixing these metaphors, but we're talking about the mystery of the incarnation seamlessly blending into the mystery of the crucifixion. The only way for the Good Shepherd to save his flock was to become one of us and then die for us.

Most of know next to nothing about shepherding and sheep. The closest we may ever get to sheep is at a petting zoo. But for the listeners in Jesus' audience 2,000 years ago, just about everybody knew at least one shepherd. So for us to appreciate Jesus' metaphor of the good shepherd, we need to get up to speed on shepherding.

In John 10:11 Jesus compares the ideal shepherd with the hired hand. While the good shepherd is willing to die protecting his sheep, the hired hand who does not own the sheep runs away at the first sign of danger. Jesus explains, "The hired hand does not care for the sheep."

It must be hard for comprehending a shepherd's undying loyalty to his sheep. But shepherds were fond of their flocks and sheep became increasingly attached to their owners. They learned to trust their shepherd. He would call them by name and lead them out to the fields. Remember the nursery rhyme?

"Mary had a little lamb
With fleece as white as snow.
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go."

So, the same affection you can have for your dog or cat, the shepherd had for his sheep. And the sheep followed their shepherd just like your pets follow you, because they trust you.

Certainly being able to trust Christ like a sheep trusts its shepherd, is a necessary component of the full abundant life. When the Master's voice calls us to follow we need to instinctively obey. But, true to form, we're as undependable as the lamb who nibbles its way beyond the green pastures and into the woods where wolves wait to devour us whole.

The prophet Isaiah hit the nail on the head, "We like sheep have gone astray." (Isaiah 53:1)
Sometimes we wander off because we think there's purer water and greener grass the next pasture over, only to realize too late we really need a shepherd to keep us out of trouble.

But let's refocus on the positive. Like sheep, we have the capacity to trust and obey.

I'm told a shepherd can hold up his staff horizontally in front of a ram, and it will jump over the staff. The next sheep in line will follow. Even after the shepherd drops the staff to the ground, each succeeding sheep will jump like the one before.

Mindless obedience? Sure. But we're not totally like sheep. Created in God's image we have the gift of free will and the right to choose. But be forewarned, if you choose wisely, everything falls into place, if you don't, everything falls out of place. But even if you choose unwisely, get lost, and become wolf bait, there's still good news: the Good Shepherd drops everything and goes looking for you and when you're found brings you home. You see, there's forgiveness only because, first and foremost, there's love.

So, through Christ, God invites you to tune out any competing voices and then listen hard for the Shepherd inviting you to trust him just enough to be empowered to be and do your best for Christ and his kingdom.

Notice I didn't say "empowered to be and do your best for your family, your friends or even your church." I said, "empowered to be and do your best for Christ and his kingdom."

Does that mean your family, friends and community don't matter? Of course not, they matter a whole lot. But don't you see, when you do your best for Christ and his Kingdom, that's when you're at your best, caring for the people and places you love. You become wiser and even more loving in your relationships and actions. How's that? Because you're learning to trust the Good Shepherd as you are led to a richer, fuller life of love and service.

But here's something else to consider: earlier I said the mystery of the incarnation seamlessly unfolded into the mystery of the crucifixion. In other words Jesus played a dual role. At one and the same time Jesus was both the Good Shepherd and a member of his own flock, both the shepherd and the lamb. Not surprisingly his dual role has implications because as members of the Body of Christ, left behind to continue his work, we've inherited the same dual roles, we are all both shepherds and sheep.

Usually we think only pastors are called and paid to shepherd their flocks, but one of the hallmarks of the Reformation, the priesthood of all believers, reminds us all baptized Christians are priests or shepherds of his flock. The implication? Sometimes you need to be shepherded but there are other times God needs you to shepherd others, but not just members of your own church. Jesus said, "And I have other sheep, not of this fold; I must bring them also and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd." (John 10:16)

Here's how I interpret this verse: Jesus is reminding us there are sheep still outside the flock who'll listen to Jesus if only the present members of his flock follow Jesus' example and lay down our lives in love and service for them. You see we too have dual roles: sheep and shepherds.

I can hear some of you thinking, "I have no problem being a sheep. I like being led to green pastures and still waters. I like knowing I have someone looking out for me. But me, a shepherd? I don't think so. Doesn't that mean I have to first get trained and the pass a test?"

Listen, this is critical, the only requirement to be a shepherd is you first have to be a disciple of Christ. Yes, you follow but sometimes God calls you to be a leader. You are empowered to take the lead and shepherd your neighbor beside the still waters, as Christ has already led you. You don't need a seminary degree. Think about this: two thousand years ago there were no seminaries, no professional ministers, only disciples who were so enthusiastic about Jesus living in and through them, the Good News spread like wild fire, lives were changed and the Kingdom of God grew in leaps and bounds.

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While you meditate on the Eucharist, the celebration of Christ's real presence and the remembrance of his dying for our sakes, keep in mind the Good Shepherd, who became the sacrificial lamb, is calling you not just to be sheep, but also shepherds who care not only for his assembled flock, but also his other sheep, not yet in the fold, who are ready and waiting to hear his voice. Will you speak for Jesus?