**John 10:11-18** Easter 4

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*John 10:11[Jesus said,] “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns 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.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Jesus the Shepherd, The Good One**

Last year there was a new insult flung about, “Sheeple!” Turns out it wasn’t new. It actually dates back to 1945. You have probably already guessed that it is a combination of the words “sheep” and “people.” “Sheeple” declares that a certain group of people, like sheep, mindlessly follow and believe what certain other people say. Sheeple look like people, talk like people, drive cars like people, but have no more sense than that famously dim animal: the sheep. Who wants to think of themselves as a sheep? That’s what makes the insult so effective.

Which is the problem with Jesus calling himself The Good Shepherd. If he is the shepherd, then who are the sheep? Would you like to be one? None of us likes being called a sheep. It implies that in the best of times we are only just barely able to take care of ourselves. That we are about as bright as a low-wattage light bulb. We prefer to picture ourselves as adventurers resolutely setting out into the back country, smart and strong enough to survive the worst nature can throw at us. We prefer to imagine ourselves lost in the large crowds of the city, and yet not lost but navigating through the noise and bustle, sure of where we are going.

Like you, I like to think of myself reasonably capable, smart, resourceful, ready for a challenge; not a sheep. If we resent being called sheep, why would we willingly admit to having a shepherd? Indeed. That’s the thing about Good Shepherd Sunday. It’s the sort of spiritual truth I wish I could just smile and wave at, say that it applies to Christians of a rather weaker variety, instead of hearing a sermon about and singing hymns about me being a sheep of the Good Shepherd. Yet, it is the picture Jesus puts before us today.

**I. Who’s Your Shepherd?**

Before we go on to think about the Good Shepherd, I want you to think about this: Who is the shepherd of your life? What guides you to what you do and who you are? You see, that’s what shepherds do. They guide. Let me here take a moment to go back to the psalm of the day, Psalm 23. It says, *“The Lord is my shepherd… He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness.”* The shepherd is always taking sheep somewhere. The day-in, day-out job of a shepherd is guidance. There are other duties, but every morning when the shepherd goes to the sheep pen and calls out the sheep, the main thought on his mind is where he is going to take them on that day. He will defend them from predators if he needs to. He will doctor them if they are injured. But even if none of those things happen, he still has to guide their steps.

What guides you? What makes you make the choices you make? What principles have lead you to create the life you have—insofar as you are able to do that? This is a deep question. While the children’s sermon is good for children, we need to ask deeper questions. Why do you do what you do? Who is your guide, your shepherd?

Well, what shepherd options are there? An obvious popular front runner is money. Many people are shepherded by a desire for money. “Money is the answer for everything,” right? Others, with a bit wider perspective are guided by success and achievement. Rather than just getting stuff, they want to feel good about what they accomplish. How about power as a shepherd? Having power over others is a goal for some. Others are on a life-long quest for knowledge and understanding. Others simply want to be entertained and have fun. For some, their guiding principle is personal freedom. Others simply prefer comfort. They go to great lengths to remove stress and the rough edges from life. For others raw pleasure is their shepherd, which has any number of associated dangers. And then finally, there is Jesus as the guide for life.

Of course, everyone assembled here would claim Jesus as his and her shepherd, the guiding principle of life. May it be so. I question no one’s faith in Jesus as his or her Savior from sin. But do we not get confused? Is that really why you work more hours than is healthy? Because of Jesus? Is that why I put off the jobs, the chores I don’t want to do? Because of Jesus? Is that why you engage in dubious behavior? Because of Jesus? I look at life and know that I am God’s child in Jesus, but how often I get confused by the voices without and within! I sin by listening to these other voices, generally because they are what I really want.

**II. Hear the GOOD Shepherd**

Jesus calls out to the sheep, I mean, the people of this world, all of whom are sheep following one shepherd or another. He says, ***“I am the Good Shepherd.”*** Jesus has this way of talking in absolutes. He doesn’t put himself out there as an option, like one of a couple dozen fragrances behind the perfume counter, each with its own virtues. He shamelessly declares, ***“I am the Good Shepherd.”***

How can he make that claim? How can he claim to be better than all the other things we want out of life? How can he claim to be the only *Good* Shepherd? Let’s approach that question by asking this question: How do you know whom you can trust?

So, some of you have seen that little blue pickup truck we have, the extra vehicle for the family. Not a beauty, but it does what we need it to do as the extra vehicle. It’s been leaking oil for a while now. We took it to a mechanic to get a quotation. After a quick look he said it would cost $350 or more to get the leak fixed. Then he said, “Or you can drive down the street to any local auto parts store, buy a particular engine oil additive for $15-20, and that might just fix the problem.” Tell you what. After all the stories I hear about mechanics and shops that buffalo people into unnecessary repairs, this guy was a breath of fresh air. He was actually willing to save us a whole bunch of money, even if it would cost him a paying customer. Needless to say, that mechanic has my trust.

I imagine you measure things about the same way. When someone is willing help you win, even at their own expense or detriment, you go all in for them. That goes for mechanics, bankers, nurses, doctors, teachers, parents—and shepherds. Who is the Good Shepherd? How about the one who gives up something for you?

As you consider the guides in your life, your shepherds, turn your ear to these words of Jesus, ***“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*** He actually gave something up. You have heard it so often that you have forgotten what that actually means. He gave up everything for you. That means you can trust him. Even when he tells you something you don’t want to hear, you know he has your good in mind! You know that because he died for your own sins and wickedness. His sacrifice of his own life is the central reason we should trust him. Jesus repeats it five times in this reading just to be sure we take notice.

For a little bit of background, that is not what shepherds would usually do, even in Jesus’ day. Sure, they would defend their sheep. Sure, they would try to fight off predators. But in the end, when it came down to a “my life vs. the sheep’s life” situation, shepherds would preserve their own life.

That is exactly what you would do. In fact, it is what you tell your own children to do: You tell them, “If someone wants to rob you, just give them the wallet. It’s not worth getting hurt for $50. If someone wants to steal your car and points a knife at you, just give them the keys. No car is worth dying for, not even a brand new car.” That’s what we tell our kids. That was true of shepherds. Some things that might even be worth fighting for aren’t worth dying for. Even for shepherds, sheep fit into that category.

But Jesus laid down his life for the flock. He gave up his life in a way that was spectacularly painful and spectacularly shameful, crucifixion. He died for sheep who, even when saved, could add nothing to what he has. And most of them would reject him anyway. And those who wouldn’t would still often wander off. That the Son of God should give up his life for the sheep is about as reasonable as suggesting that your own dear child ought to die for your cat. God forbid! But Jesus did for the sheep!

Jesus is not *a* shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd!

**III. Listening to the Good Shepherd Is Living for the Good Shepherd**

Compare him to the other shepherds whom you are tempted to follow.

Compare being shepherded by Jesus to being shepherded by wealth. The Good Book itself tells us that, *“Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income”* (Ecc 5:10). Think of the relentless pursuit for more and more if wealth is your shepherd.

Compare the Good Shepherd to a life bent on achievement and status. (Please notice that I am not saying that achievement and status are bad, unless they are our prime motivators.) You will need to get ahead. Climbing the ladder will mean stepping on other people’s hands and heads. And to really achieve, you just won’t have the time and effort that underachievers have for church and the community of believers.

Compare the Good Shepherd to a life whose shepherd is comfort, whose goal is no stress and no worries. The shepherd called Comfort will convince you that Jesus’ every request to pick up your cross and follow him is an unreasonable request that no one should have to honor.

Compare the Good Shepherd with a life shepherded by pleasure. Shepherd Pleasure will give a life that starts fun, but ends up riddled with immorality and addictions, with wealth squandered, health falling to pieces, and children growing up with horror stories for their home life.

Again I ask, Who is your shepherd? Why do you do what you do?

False shepherds appeal to us because they promise what we want, now. They are the easy way. On the other hand the Good Shepherd says, “I have given up all for you. Now take up your cross and follow me. Find your life by losing your life.” But we know we can trust him.

In that Good Shepherd we hear the voice of one who has given up so much for us, who declares all our sins forgiven, who would have us live for Him and for others, even as he lived for the Father’s will and for us. In him we find the life that is truly life. It is life not based on trying to satisfy insatiable desires, but a living relationship with God: ***“I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”***

The life shepherded by Jesus is a life that rejoices in opportunities to stop and hear the voice of the Good Shepherd: worshiping in church, devotion time at home, doctrinally sound podcasts in the car. It is a life that enjoys turning to God in prayers for help and strength and thanksgiving. The life guided by the Good Shepherd kind of looks like the picture on the front of the bulletin: sheep attentively listening for the voice of their shepherd in every moment of life; sheep—maybe even sheeple, if you will—who trust Christ’s word at all times, no matter what he says.

Who’s Your Shepherd? Retune your hearing to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. Remember what makes him the Shepherd, the Good One. Amen.