

The Good Shepherd
John 10:1-18
Colebrook Congregational Church
May 7, 2017 / Fourth Sunday of Easter

Today's selection is called the Good Shepherd Dialogue. It has been used as the basis for giving clergy the title of "pastor." However, a seminary professor of mine, when we studied this passage, instead told us that we are not shepherds, because it is Jesus who is the shepherd. And if anything, the clergy are more like the sheep dogs, because we run around making a lot of noise.

This dialogue that Jesus gives about a Good Shepherd is one of the most popular and enduring pictures of Jesus, one where we see Him caring for His flock, protecting them from harm. Not just to us, but to those living in Judea and Samaria and Galilee back then, the image of the Good Shepherd was well known, through the 23rd Psalm, and also from the Prophet Ezekiel, chapter 34, where he spoke for God, pretty much giving a sermon on Psalm 23, expounding it thoroughly and practically quoting it.

This sort of imagery was familiar to Jesus' listeners, which in this case included not just His Disciples, but also a group of Pharisees and scribes. Immediately before Jesus gives this Dialogue, there is the confrontation between Jesus and some Pharisees who had taken issue with Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath. That story was one of those from Lent, and you could see the Sunday School's coloring pages of that story on the dividers downstairs for the past several weeks as you entered Fellowship Hall. That is important to remember when looking at this Dialogue. Jesus is giving this Dialogue in front of Disciples AND Pharisees, where He describes both shepherds and thieves.

Jesus starts off using a couple of poetic literary devices. There is the antithetical parallel in identifying the Good Shepherd, first by establishing who he is not, then pivoting to who he is. This is followed by the chiasmic parallel, with the images of hearing and the movement of the sheep. The purpose of this is to show the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep, in the recognition of the sheep and the ability of the shepherd. Then the absence of this is how the sheep recognize the strangers and not respond to them. That is just how shepherding is done.

John then tells us that Jesus was being too poetic and symbolic, so they did not understand Him, especially the Pharisees. So Jesus needed to get a bit more explicit. So, it is through the gate that the sheep find safety. Through the gate that the sheep find sustenance. And Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, is the one at the gate. The shepherd prevents the thieves from culling the herd, and other dangers. Hired hands would not risk themselves for the herd, only the good shepherd would protect them to that level.

These “I AM” statements made by Jesus are completely reliant on the sheep. They lose all meaning without the presence of the sheep, us, the church community. So, they not only reveal about Jesus, but also who Jesus is in relationship to who follows Him. The identity of Jesus and the community that gathers around Him are linked. Who Jesus is and what He does, determines who we are.

Jesus is like the shepherd and all of us are like the sheep. No one is described as being His assistant shepherd, or even sheepdogs. All are equal, no one above another, no one any more important than anyone else. There are many examples in the Book of Acts, the Letter of James, the Gospels, and more that bear this out, forbidding showing partiality or extra deference to anyone.

We as a community are united by our mutual knowledge of Jesus, by our listening and responding to Jesus' voice, calling to us. We all hear the call and we follow our Good Shepherd.

Most importantly, the community that gathers around Jesus receives the identity of those whom Jesus is willing to sacrifice Himself for. Like a Good Shepherd, Jesus has sacrificed Himself on our behalf, ensuring safety for us, His flock. And this is not exclusive, it is open to all who want to join, and we as a community must welcome them in this light. Jesus says the Good Shepherd voluntarily lays down his life for “the” sheep, not “his” sheep. This is an openness that should define church communities, not exclusivity.

[It is also why some early groups and other books, that I've spoken about lately, were declared heretical in the early centuries of Christianity, because they pushed exclusivity and secrecy, instead of the open welcomeness that we know Jesus taught.]

So, as our community makes decisions, together, as to what we do, and the directions we go, we must ask ourselves, are we reflecting all the qualities of the Good Shepherd?

Please join me in the Spirit of Prayer:

O God, Open our eyes and our ears that wherever we go, we may hear Your voice calling us by name; calling us to serve, calling us to share, calling us to praise, so that we never give up on the promise of Your kingdom, where the world is transformed, and all can enjoy life in all its fullness. Amen.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

[PAUSE]

O God who welcomes all in love, to You we pray for the good of Your church, our community, and the concerns of those in need. We lift up our hearts in faith to You, the one who hears all prayers and holds close all of Creation.

Thank you for all the blessings and gifts you have given us, for those you have led into our lives and for moving us into the lives of others. And we thank you for using us as instruments of your divine love for us all.

You know our faults and yet You promise to forgive. Help us to face up to ourselves, so that, as You move toward us in mercy, we may repent, turn to You, and receive mercy.

We pray for those in need—those who hunger or are homeless. We pray for those in pain—the abused, brokenhearted and lonely. We pray for the sick in body and in mind, and for those who grieve. For the life of our community and all those who put their trust in You for all our todays and all our tomorrows, we pray that Your lovingkindness to the world would be offered through our hands, our words, our deeds, & our hearts.

We pray for Your guidance in all that we do, to better understand the witness of Your Followers. We ask that You come to us when we are afraid and that you give us the strength & perseverance to live through any disappointments and the courage to overcome obstacles. Fill us with Your Spirit and make us living carriers of of Your Love to all who need it. Ignite our Hearts to act as You want us to do, and help us to recognize the stranger in our midst.

We especially pray for:
The Suddath Family
Sean Larose

Gracious God, we offer these prayers and all those of our hearts up to you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

John 10:1-18

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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.'