

I AM the Good Shepherd
John 10:11-18
1 John 3:16-24

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Pastor Doug Browne
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John 10:11-18

‘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.’

1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

Previously on “I AM,” Jesus has explained that he is the Bread of Life, the way that we can get abundant, eternal life, starting not after we’re dead, but right now. Jesus also explained that he is the Light of the World, letting us see the beautiful image of God in each of our sisters and brothers. Then Jesus said that he is the door for the sheep – the way that they get to what they need. He explained that he knows his sheep and his sheep know him.

This week, the Gospel selection comes immediately after the one from last week. Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd is one of those images in the Bible that is used all over the places, isn't it? There are three Good Shepherd congregations just here in Columbus.¹ Congregations, hospitals, hospices, rehab centers, curricula, schools, anything that is associated or could be associated with the Church gets called "Good Shepherd."

Likewise, the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the most common ways in which Jesus is depicted in art. The image which Irene found for the bulletin and the PowerPoint today is typical. Jesus' hair is in a conventional modern businessman-like style and he has a neatly-trimmed beard. Jesus is wearing a white robe that miraculously stays white, even though he is hanging out with sheep.

I have seen this basic image in nearly every medium of visual art I can think of. Paintings, line art, photography, sculpture, stained glass, you name it. I'm sure that you have, too. Not very many of these images look a lot like what Jesus probably looked like to his followers, but they are our idealized images of what the good shepherd looks like.

So that's what many people have envisioned as "The Good Shepherd."

What did Jesus mean?

A shepherd lives with the sheep, in the fields, for months at a time. A shepherd finds the sheep pasture and clean water to drink, bandages the hurt sheep, and takes care of them. He or she protects the sheep from predators. He or she keeps the flock together, seeks out the lost and brings them back, and helps deliver the lambs when otherwise both lamb and ewe would die. In addition to all that, yes, a shepherd herds the sheep, guides them from where they are to where they need to be. That is what it is to be a shepherd.

¹ In the order in which Google presented them to me: one Methodist, one Baptist, and one nondenominational.

Jesus says that he is more than *A* shepherd, he is *The Good* shepherd. He knows his sheep and they know his voice. He gathers the scattered sheep from wherever they are, and he lays down his life for the sheep.

He contrasts that with the hired hand, who cares more about their own provision and security. The difference between the two is in motivation. The hired hand cares ultimately about himself; the good shepherd cares ultimately about the sheep. The hired hand is there to do a job; the good shepherd is there to protect, nurture, and deliver the sheep at all costs. When the chips are down, the hired hand runs; the good shepherd stays, even laying down his life for the sheep.

In our world today, many people and things have their effects on us, but they ultimately care only about themselves. Many people and things, celebrities, corporations, governments, want us to trust them, but they prioritize themselves and their own interests above ours. These people and things each have their place, but they are not shepherds.

No, a shepherd has the sheep's well-being in mind above everything else. A shepherd is not an employer or a government. A shepherd is more like a loving parent. There is an old Celtic proverb that says, "To a child, the name of God is Mother."

Think back to when you were a little kid. Mommy could fix anything. From a skinned knee to hurt feelings. You trusted beyond thought that she would take care of you – the idea that she would not take care of you did not enter your mind.

If you did not have a loving, nurturing parent or caregiver like that when you were a little kid, I am truly sorry. Every child should. That is the kind of loving caregiver we are talking about here.

Jesus is the good shepherd who is invested not in himself, but in the sheep. What does it mean to be loved that way by God? It changes how you look at the world.

It can be tough to trust that God's priority is for us, especially when we are suffering or when we look out at the world and despair. But it is true.

Jesus laid down his life for us.

There are things in this world that are not part of God's vision of a righteous and just and peaceful world.

There are things in this world that are bad.

There are things in this world that go beyond bad, they are simply wrong.

We ask God, "How could you let mass shootings happen?"

We ask God, "How could you let children die?"

Sometimes we can answer the specific questions. Some specific bad things happen because human beings like us make bad decisions. Shootings happen because a human being gets a gun, he or she (usually he), takes the gun where people are, and he pulls the trigger. 9/11 happened because human beings made the decision, carefully planned it over the course of years, and then carried out their plan.

These unnatural disasters are not part of God's plan for humanity. God does not send shootings or other violence as judgment or punishment. That is just not the God whom we worship, the God whom we see described in Scripture, the God whom we experience in the countless expressions of God's love we find in our lives. That is not consistent with the character of a God who is our shepherd.

Likewise, natural disasters are not sent by God as judgment or punishment on anyone. When a tornado or a hurricane or flooding or fire is hurting someone whom we do not like, it is a very childish thing to claim that it must be God's judgment on those people. When a divorce or a death in the family or a mass layoff has happened to someone whom we do not like, it is tempting, but wrong, to be happy about their pain.

The Germans have a word for that very human feeling – the word is *shadenfreude* – “Joy from another's pain.” It is very human, but it is not only childish, but mean to rejoice or be glad that bad things have happened to someone else.

No, when bad things happen, God did not cause them to happen to us. Jesus is right there, walking with us through the valley of the shadow of death. That is what it is to be a shepherd.

Jesus told us what judgment would be like, and that it will happen when he comes into his kingdom. “He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” He will separate people one from another based on how well they have loved their neighbors and put that love into practice. There will be consequences for our decisions and for our actions in our lives.²

But Jesus said that this will happen “when the Son of Man comes in his glory.”³ Not now. And Jesus said that he will explain to those who are experiencing those negative consequences exactly why. They will not suffer anonymous bad things and be expected to get the hint. That's not how God works. God knows that human beings, overall, are not subtle, and God loves us too much to set us up to fail.

² Matthew 25:31-46.

³ Matthew 25:31

My sisters and brothers, truly I tell you, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, loves us so much that he laid down his life for us. And for our sisters and brothers. Even the ones who were killing him in a horrific way.⁴

That is what it is for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd. That amazing fact changed the world forever, and, when we truly accept it, it changes us.

God wants love like that to be in our hearts. In each of our hearts.

So, as First John says, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”

Let us put our love into action in our lives and in the lives of other people around us.

This next week, we all know people who are experiencing bad things in their lives, whether that is a simple bad day or the loss of a job, their home, or even their spouse.

Be kind to them. With people whom you like, that comes easily, but you don't have to like the person to be kind to them. Kind words, or a truthful job recommendation, or a casserole, or attending a funeral, do not depend on whether you believe this person deserved what they got.

You have a good heart. Be kind in your actions first, and you will find that your heart will catch up.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

⁴ Luke 23:34.