

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
22 April 2018

John 10:11-18

Jesus says today, “I am the good (Honorable, decent, caring, devoted...) shepherd.” What makes him such an honorable shepherd is the fact that he is willing to “lay down his life for the sheep.” By using the image of shepherd to describe himself and his mission, Jesus uses an image that has come to represent a number of things for the people of Israel. For some shepherds symbolize wisdom and experience. By the word “shepherd” they envision an older, bearded man, carefully leading his flock in the pastures. For others the image of “Shepherd” leads them to think of the great leaders of Israel. Moses had been a shepherd, so was David and others. The word is often used to describe the King and “Philosophers and orators often compared the art of governing a people to the art of shepherding a flock.” (<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john10x11.htm>). There are others in first century Palestine who hold Shepherds in very low esteem. Some see shepherds as dishonest people who often allow their sheep to graze on someone else’s land. For this people the idea of a good shepherd almost sounds like a contradiction in terms.

Whether you like shepherds or not everyone would have understood the image. Jesus calls himself a shepherd and by this he means a leader, someone called upon to protect and care for sheep. Then Jesus describes the precarious situation of the sheep, which makes necessary such commitment from him. He says that the sheep are under constant threat by wolves. These wolves often snatch the sheep and scatter them. The sheep are unable to defend themselves. They are prone to wandering away from the herd and into dangerous territory. They are in constant danger. If you have ever watched nature shows you understand these images. The most successful predators in nature always seek to isolate the prey, to separate it from the herd, to catch it alone and unprepared for the attack. Jesus says this is the very reason why he is an honorable shepherd. Whereas “The hired hand... sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away...” Jesus is willing to protect the sheep, even if he has to lay down his life to protect them.

The sheep have value to Jesus and this value is clearly seen in the relationship that he develops with the sheep. He knows their names, which means that he has taken the time to name them; he enters the sheep pen by the front gate, which means he owns the sheep and the sheep know his voice and know that he cares for them. “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” He is willing to die for them because he has a relationship with them and each one of them has great value to him. Now, you may ask, “Why are these smelly, dumb animals so valuable that the

shepherd is willing to die for them? Are they extremely expensive? Are they some special breed of sheep? Are they so incredibly cute that the shepherd has no choice but to save them? Are they the best producers of milk or wool?"

My friends the good news today is that the passage doesn't tell us anything about the color, size, gender, or milk productivity of the sheep. All it tells us is that they are weak, defenseless, and in danger. I say that this is good news because, if you haven't guessed it yet, these sheep represent all of us. We are the sheep Jesus is talking about. He knows all of us by name and he is willing to die for all of us. Not because we are white or black. Not because we are wealthy or poor. Not because we are male or female. This shepherd is willing to die for us the sheep in spite of our propensity to wonder, our propensity for idol worship, and our propensity for betrayal. He is willing to die because he has a relationship with us, we belong to him, and he knows us by name.

We are Jesus' sheep, but he tells us today, "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." There are other sheep out there who haven't yet heard the shepherd's voice and for this reason they don't belong. Jesus says that he is under compulsion to bring them in. This is an emphatic "must." He doesn't say, "I would like to bring them," "I want to be considered as an option by them," "I would be nice if they joined me." He says, "I must bring them into the flock. They must listen to my voice." There are sheep out there who are in grave danger, they are alone and isolated, they are vulnerable and defenseless. Worse of all, many of them don't even realize that they are in danger. It is our job, yours and mine, to lead these sheep into the Good Shepherd's flock. It is our job to point them to the one who is willing to protect them, love them, and care for them.

My friends, when Jesus preached this parable, he was thinking of us. We were the other sheep. The non-jews, the gentiles, the foreigners, the other. And I am so grateful for the faithfulness of the church in hearing this evangelistic mandate to go out to the ends of the world, and of course Colombia is very close to the end of the world, to preach the Gospel of Salvation. Without their missionary zeal and their willingness to share their faith, I probably would have never met this Jesus of Nazareth. Now, I don't always agree with their methods, but I am grateful that through their efforts I have come to know Christ, and I am known by Christ. Now it is our turn.

There are brothers and sisters in our midst who are in a desperate need to be in relationship with this Jesus of Nazareth. There are many who need the compassion, the forgiveness, and healing that only he can give the world. It is up to us to share our faith with them. It is up to us! Unfortunately, sometimes we are the very wolves other sheep need to worry about. Sometimes our lifestyles lead ourselves and others into the very dangers of isolation and sin our Good Shepherd died to save us from. An old priest I know used to pray, "Protect me God from other Christians and I will protect myself from the pagans."

I pray that today will be the day we hear Christ's voice of invitation and make a decision to go into the highways and byways of this world to preach the reconciliation that is only possible through the Gospel of Jesus. I pray that today will be the day we hear our shepherd's voice in a new and powerful way. We are the sheep who are now called to be shepherds. May we do all in our power to lead other sheep to Christ that they may be found, even as we have been found.

May our Lord continue to bless you, Amen!