

## “I Have Other Sheep That Do Not Belong to This Fold...”

John 10:11-18; 1 John 3:16-24

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Jesus is the Good Shepherd. On that one hand, that image is so profoundly simple, and wondrously comforting. On the other it is so incredibly complex, and deeply challenging.

Let's start with the simple. “I am the Good Shepherd,” Jesus says. Not just *a* shepherd; not just *the* Shepherd; but the *Good Shepherd*. There were plenty of shepherds throughout Israel's history before Jesus. Young men like Samuel, who tended the sheep that belonged to his father. Out in the fields, keeping the sheep safe from harm. Some of those young men did a fine job. Others cared more about their own self-interest than the welfare of the flock. Shepherds did not necessarily have a reputation for being men of strong character and goodwill. Too many of them found less-than-wholesome ways to pass the time. Too few of them truly cared for the sheep the way they should have.

There were also shepherds on a larger scale, shepherds in a metaphorical sense. Israel's kings and other leaders were referred to as shepherds. Some of them truly cared about the well-being of the people under their charge. Some of them sought to govern with both wisdom and compassion. Many others were less noble-minded; many were too enamored with the glory of the office, too enthralled by the power they wielded. They weren't interested in what was truly in the best interests of the people or the nation; they were more motivated by selfish gain and ambition. So there were *good* shepherds for the people of Israel, and there were *bad* shepherds, and if you read the Old Testament it is abundantly clear which was which. The faithful prophets of God lauded the good shepherds – and rebuked the bad.

So when Jesus stood up before a crowd of Jews and announced that *he* is the Good Shepherd, he was making a strong statement. If you read this story in context, he's actually addressing a crowd of Pharisees, whom he has just rebuked for their disbelief and their treatment of a blind man whom Jesus had healed. This speech of Jesus doesn't happen in a vacuum. Jesus declares that *he* is the Shepherd; *he* is the leader who is truly worthy to be followed. He boldly claims that he is the *Good* Shepherd. In doing so, he is implying that the Pharisees have been *bad* shepherds for the people of Israel.

As Jesus talks, he describes two characteristics of his own particularly unique version of shepherding. First: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Jesus will be offering his own life as a sacrificial self-offering, for the good of his entire flock. This is completely unprecedented in the Bible. There is no record of any other shepherd – literal or metaphorical – doing something like that. Nor is there even any hint that a shepherd would be *expected* to do such a thing. Sheep are valuable, yes, but if it came down to a choice between saving the sheep or saving their own life, wouldn't most shepherds choose to save their own life? That's what the hired hand does. A hungry wolf is coming. The shepherd has to make a choice: try to fight the wolf, hopefully saving some of the sheep, but at

great personal risk – or just get out of harm’s way, run, and hide, while the sheep get slaughtered. The hired hand may lose his job – but he would still be alive. That’s not what the Good Shepherd does. No, he will go willingly to his death, precisely so that he can save the lives of the sheep. This was unusual, unexpected, unprecedented. No other shepherd had ever envisioned his role in that way before.

The second particularly unique characteristic in Jesus’s version of shepherding is this: “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” Jesus’s relationship with the sheep of his flock is extraordinarily special. There is an *intimacy* here, a deep connection, that goes far beyond the typical relationship between an animal and its owner, no matter how precious and dear that animal and its owner are to one another. Some of you have very special relationships with your beloved dog, horse, or other pet. You deeply care for one another. The relationship Jesus has with the sheep of his flock is deeper even than that. It is as deep and as intimate as the relationship Jesus has with his own Father. Jesus had been *begotten* by the Father, before the world was made; Jesus had been co-eternal with the Father, present in God’s very acts of creation. There was a mystical union there; they were separate, and yet they were the same; they were distinct, and yet they were one. Jesus is saying here that his relationship with the sheep of his flock – his relationship with *us* – is as uniquely special and intimate as his relationship with God. It is as personal, as enriching, as engaging. What we feel, *he* feels. What we experience, *he* experiences. What we suffer, *he* suffers. What we endure, *he* endures. What we know, *he* knows. The trials and tribulations of our life are known to him in intimate detail. When we weep, he weeps with us. When we hurt, he hurts with us.

This is not something we should ever take for granted. We are *so incredibly loved*. We are *so uniquely precious* to him. We are never abandoned, never forsaken, never overlooked, never forgotten. Our griefs and pains are known to him in a deeply personal way. Oh, sure. There are times we may *feel* like we are all alone in this world. There are times we may feel so incredibly unloved. There are times when our pain runs so deep we don’t think anyone can possibly understand or empathize. We are wrong. There is always *Someone* who cares, *Someone* who suffers and weeps with us. Our *Shepherd*. The *Good Shepherd*, who loves us with the *deepest possible love*, a love that stretches beyond time and eternity. He is here to protect you, to guide you, to nurture you. He also *lays down his life for you*. He willingly offers his own life so that *you* can live in freedom and joy. He’s here *because he loves you*.

It is important that we don’t forget that. This is such an incredibly special and precious gift. You will never be given *anything* else that even comes *close* to the precious gift your Shepherd gives you.

But you also need to know: he didn’t come just for *you*. He came ... for the *whole world*.

That is Jesus’s next point, to that crowd of Pharisees. He says: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.” It’s easy to glide right over these short little sentences, but we should be careful not to. Those two sentences are *loaded* with implications. Jesus is stating – emphatically – that his mission *is not* just a mission to the Jews. He is not going to be the Shepherd of *just* people descended from Jacob. There are others – *many* others – who belong to his flock as well.

We know that, of course. None of us would be here in this worship service if Jesus had come only for the Jews. But for Jesus to say that he has “other sheep” who do not “belong to this fold” ... that was bold. It upset everything the Jews understood about their own identity. *They* were the special ones! *Then* were the chosen people! What Jesus said challenged their identity as “the people of God.”

We sometimes think that *we* are the ones who matter most. That *our* little group, however we define it, stands at the center of it all. That we have earned, or that we deserve, some kind of special treatment. We get conceited; we get arrogant; we get self-centered and selfish. We start envisioning a universe in which *we* are the ones who hold the important roles, one in which *we* have special privileges and rights, that other people who aren't like us do not have. We start hoarding wealth, or resources, or maybe even vaccines. We forget that there are other people out there, human beings made in the image of God, just like we are, and that Jesus came to save them too. We forget that there are sheep who do not belong to *our* fold, yet Jesus is *their* Shepherd just as much as he is *our* Shepherd. "I must bring them also," says Jesus. "So there will be one flock, one Shepherd." The Shepherd's flock is, in truth, *incredibly* diverse, filled with people of every race, color, and nation, speaking a vast multitude of languages, all of them paying homage to Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who came to save *all* of them.

That truth can be sobering enough. Not everyone wants to hear it. I am reminded of Jesus's first sermon. He tells the congregation in Nazareth about the famine that took place during the days of the prophet Elijah. He reminds them that the people whom God sent Elijah to help were not Israelites. They were foreigners. That message didn't go over well; the members of the synagogue were furious. They literally tried to *kill* Jesus, right then. I'm not making this up; you can find that story in Luke 4. Sometimes people don't like to hear the message that God cares about people *who aren't like them*.

But it gets even more challenging when we consider what John has to say in his epistle. "We know love by this," says John, "that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." John is calling on us Christians to offer sacrificial service to our fellow Christians. That includes Christians *who belong to other folds*. John asks: "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?" Think about the implications of that. The world's goods are not evenly distributed around the globe. Some nations and some people are *vastly* more well-off than many others. There are Christians – our brothers and sisters – all over the world who are in need. The degree to which we are willing to help them, John is saying, is an indicator of just how much God's love *truly* abides in us. For we are all part of *the same flock*.

When Jesus said that he was the Good Shepherd, that message was not met with open arms by everyone who heard him. John says, "The Jews were divided because of his words." Some of them thought he was speaking the truth. Others thought he was possessed by a demon, and out of his mind.

The question is, what do *you* think? Many of us take great comfort in the knowledge that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. If we were in the sanctuary, I'd point you to the stained glass window that depicts that very pastoral scene of Jesus tending the sheep in his flock. Speaking for myself, I am extremely grateful that Jesus is *my* Shepherd, that Jesus chose to lay down his life for *me*, that Jesus knows *me* just as deeply as Jesus knows *God*. That is incredibly reassuring and comforting.

But let us not miss the other critical implication of the fact that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. *We are not the only sheep Jesus cares about*. There are plenty of sheep who *aren't like us*. Black, brown, white; Asian, African, Native American, Hispanic, Latinx, Arab, Indian, Palestinian ... the list is very long. There are Christian believers in every corner of the world. Jesus cares about *them* just as much as he cares about *us*. And just as Jesus sacrificed himself for us, so too are we called to offer sacrifices of various kinds to bring help and hope to our fellow sheep – *whoever* and *wherever* they may be....

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