

Sermon: Listen for the Voice of the Shepherd

John 10:11-18

“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

12 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. 13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

14 I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

16 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. 17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 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.”

A MINISTER’S WORK IS NEVER DONE

The minister who was my supervisor during an intern year told of what his father (who was also a minister) said to him when he was ordained. He quoted an old adage, “A man works from sun to sun, but a woman’s work is never done.”

His father then said that this is true of the ministry. The minister’s work is never done.

In a sense that’s true. A minister is always the minister, no matter what he or she is doing.

When Carrollyn and I take a cruise, I purposely hide what I do for as long as possible at the dinner table. Why? Because when it comes out what I do for a living that dominates the conversation.

I am no longer just another person taking a vacation. I am the religious expert. Folks either clam up or say the most outrageous things to impress me with their piety. I on the other hand just want to spend a few days without the pressure of being “the minister.”

Ministry is open-ended and demanding in a peculiar way. The demands come mainly in the form of expectations. Ministers have high expectations of themselves. Very rarely if ever do you find a minister who says, “My work is finished. I’ve done church as well as it’s possible to be done.”

And church members have high expectations of their pastor. They might not be able to love God and neighbor as they should, but they expect their pastor to do it ... or at least come closer to it.

Someone once said that the prophets spoke when they heard from God, but the parish minister speaks each Sunday whether he or she hears from God or not. That's true. Preaching each week also brings a peculiar kind of pressure.

A very accomplished ruling elder was called upon to preach. He was able to prepare a good sermon and preach it, but he later confided to a friend. I can't believe how hard it was. I can't imagine doing this 52 Sundays a year.

My work in Presbytery has caused me to work with many pastors that are suffering from burnout. They are disappointed because they do not live up their own expectations or the expectations of their members.

They respond by working harder. But, that doesn't help. In fact it made things worse.

JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Ministers need to remember (like we all need to remember) that you cannot preach salvation by grace when you are living by works. Our lives need to match our theology.

If we try to serve God and others out of a compulsive need to be successful or a compulsive need to please people, somewhere along the line we are going to be bitterly disappointed.

Now you might say, "Pastor isn't it your job to be the shepherd of the sheep? Aren't you supposed to be the one in charge?"

Well, now that you mention it, that's not my job. In our lesson for today Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." Jesus is in charge. And why is Jesus the Good Shepherd? He is a Good Shepherd because he lays down his life for the sheep.

Our membership in the flock is not based upon what we have done but upon what God in Christ has done for us. Christ died for our sins on the cross. The Good Shepherd laid down his life for us. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Good sheep do not produce a Good Shepherd. The sheep are the recipients, the beneficiaries of the shepherd's sacrifice and love.

To put it another way, today's lesson is not about us. Today's lesson is about Jesus.

CHURCH REDEFINED

Over the years I've noticed that when I ask someone why he or she is not involved in church they say something like,

"I don't think I need to belong to a church. I try to live a good life and help other people when I can. Isn't that what being a Christians is all about?"

Actually, that's not what being a Christian is all about. Christianity is about hearing the voice of Christ and following him. It is not a do it yourself project.

This passage teaches us that the church is not about what we do, the church is not the result of our determined hard work. The church is about what the Good Shepherd does for us. The church is that place where Christ comes to us, and loves us and calls us into his fold with other sheep that he has called.

I am a minister of the word and sacrament. But, the word I preach is not my own word, my own creation. It is God's word as revealed in Scripture and especially in God's son, Jesus.

In the same way, though I am charged with the administration of the sacraments, the sacraments are not mine to give or withhold. We say that the sacraments are the "gifts of God for the people of God."

The sacraments are not something that we do for God. The sacraments are something that God does for us. They are symbols of the fact that he is the Good Shepherd. He lays down his life for the sheep. It is his body broken and his blood shed for the sheep of his flock.

Jesus is the shepherd. We are the sheep. It is not our job to lead God's people on some mighty campaign. It is not our job to develop some powerful, elaborate organization.

It is simply our job to hear the voice of the shepherd. It is our job to listen for the voice of Jesus and then follow where he leads.

DUMB AND DUMBER

Whenever we study this passage someone always mentions the fact that sheep are dumb animals.

I have met some shepherds who would disagree with you on that one, but according to our passage for today though the sheep are helpless and totally dependent, they do have one redeeming characteristic.

They know the shepherd's voice and they listen for the shepherd's call.

I'm told that in the Middle East several flocks can be drinking at the same watering hole. To the outside observer it looks like the shepherds will never be able to separate their flocks.

But, when one shepherd is ready to leave, he retreats to a hillside and makes his distinctive call. And the sheep of his flock hear his voice, and they come. It is amazing.

We, on the other hand are not so good at hearing the voice of our Shepherd.

If sheep are dumb, we are dumber.

Instead of listening for the call of our master, we often listen to other voices, voices that lead us astray.

Jesus talks about these other voices in our lesson for today.

He tells us that in addition to the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, there is also the hired hand or as the KJV translates it, the hireling.

Hireling is a good translation because the word means someone who is motivated by money.

The hireling doesn't own the sheep. The hireling is not willing to risk his life for the sheep.

The hireling doesn't really care about the sheep. The hireling is just in it for the money.

When the wolf comes, the hireling runs away.

The sheep are snatched up and scattered by the wolf.

HIRELINGS TODAY

There are many hirelings in our world, people who are motivated only by the money. Just as it was in Jesus day, today there are religious hirelings and political hirelings.

These people try to create a sense of dissatisfaction in our lives and then try to fill that hole in our life with some new product or some new candidate or some new "savior" that will give us just what we want and need. They promise to give us the life we want, the abundant life that we deserve.

Many voices in our world suggest that the good life can be found in getting more money, more cars, more Facebook friends ... you name it. They want us to believe if we have more stuff life is better.

And we often buy their argument and the stuff.

Unfortunately, there's a hidden cost to buying into this scheme. It is the cost of a poor self-image.

Last week we learned that God loves us. We are God's children. This loving God who created the universe forgives us and gives us a place in the kingdom.

But, in order to control us, the huckster has to convince us that this is not true. He tells us: We are not good enough. We do not have enough stuff. We are not worthy. We are incomplete unless we purchase whatever he is selling.

This, of course, is the very definition of idolatry, the idea that we can replace God with things. And it leads to profound disappointment and dangerous behavior.

We are scattered by our compulsive addiction to the idols this world has to offer. We shop too much eat too much. Our houses and our bodies are full, but we still feel so empty.

What we need is not more stuff. What we need is God in our lives. What we need is the Good Shepherd.

In John 10:10, the verse that precedes our lesson for today Jesus says that he has come to give us abundant life.

That's what we really want, not just more stuff but abundant life, real life. And real life begins not with what we want or what we have been told to want.

Real life begins when we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, the one who voluntarily lays down his life for the sheep.

AN IMAGE OF GOD

In the Gospel of John Jesus taught his disciples about himself using a variety of images. They are the so-called "I am" images.

You'll remember in the book of Exodus when God appears to Moses in the burning bush, Moses asks God to tell him His Name. In this way when Moses goes to lead his people out of Egypt and the people ask who sent him, Moses can use the sacred name of God.

God replies to Moses' request by saying "I am."

In John's gospel the main point from beginning to end is to present Jesus as the incarnation of the great "I am." Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

Jesus says, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

Jesus says, "I am the living water" who quenches your thirst forever.

And in today's lesson Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd."

You may have noticed that one of our other lectionary lessons for today in addition to John 10 is Psalm 23. In that passage the Lord is portrayed as the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep.

The Lord supplies the needs of his people. The Lord leads His people by the still waters. The Lord protects His people as they go through the valley of the shadow of death.

And so when Jesus makes says, "I am the Good Shepherd" the claim he is making is clear. God was in Christ. In the man Jesus we see the human face of God, the very picture of God's love.

Some of the earliest images of Jesus found in churches and tombs were not portrayals of Jesus on the cross or the infant in the manger. Rather they picture Jesus as the gentle shepherd. In what may be one of the earliest paintings a very young Jesus has a lamb draped over his shoulders. And the caption underneath reads,

"I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me."

The early church understood. This is the definitive picture of God's love as revealed in Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd. He is the One who seeks the lost. His love reaches out to us and does not let us go.

A WIDENESS IN GOD'S MERCY

The seeking love of God is also portrayed in our lesson for today.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day (not unlike the religious leaders of our day) thought that they knew who was "in" and who was "out" when it came to the kingdom of God.

But, Jesus threw them a curve ball. Jesus said that the Good Shepherd decides who is in the sheepfold. They do not. Jesus said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold." (John 10:16)

So many people think they know who the chosen ones of God are. But, in this passage we learn that there are some "other sheep that do not belong to this fold."

We have no way of knowing who these sheep are or how they will be called. All we know is this: when the Good Shepherd calls them, they will answer the call and become a part of the flock.

The love of God as revealed in the Good Shepherd was greater than those first disciples could imagine.

Who could imagine an enemy like Saul being converted on the road to Damascus? Who could imagine Gentiles coming to faith and being received into the kingdom of God? Who could imagine a small sect of Judaism becoming a worldwide faith?

They couldn't imagine such things in Jesus' day, and neither can we imagine the width and breath of God's mercy today.

One of my favorite hymns in terms of theology is "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." The words of that hymn are a very good interpretation of our lesson for today. In Jesus Christ we see that God is indeed the Good Shepherd. There is (as the hymn puts it) "a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea."

The final verse of this hymn reads,

"For the love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind; and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.

If our love were but more faithful, we should take him at his word; and our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord."

Someone asked a good question in Bible study. He asked,

"Why don't we listen to the voice of Jesus? What he says in Scripture is clear. Why do we act like it is such a mystery?"

I would suggest that the answer is found in that last line. The love of God is broader than the measure of our mind. The heart of the eternal is kind in a way that we can't imagine.

And so, like the disciples of old we can hear and understand what Jesus has to say, but quite often we can't take it to heart.

But, what we can do is trust in the goodness of the Lord. What we can do is ask God to give us a heart transplant, to widen our view of the kingdom, to expand our vision of the kingdom.

We can serve God not out of compulsion but out of gratitude.

Let us once again listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, the merciful Lord who still calls us wayward sheep home.

Amen.