

The Good Shepherd

Easter 4

April 21, 2024

John 10:11-18

The Word of the Lord from John 10:11: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. The Difference between Sheep and Shepherds, Man and God

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”

Really? Seriously? A good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep?

After all, imagine chatting with a rancher who says, “I love my herd. They’re great cattle, and I would die to keep them alive.” Die for cows? Do you even want to be seen with a man who would die for cows?

Back in Winnipeg, we had offers from people who were most willing to come into our school and teach our students about their bats, rats or snakes. Imagine one of them coming and saying, “Oh, I’d lay down my life for these rats.” They would not be invited back.

Some of you know that Nancy and I have a dog at home. Her name is Mindy, but we often call her “Shredder” because she loves to tear up whatever paper products we have left lying around. We get annoyed by that behavior, but generally we like Mindy and try to take good care of her. But if I’m ever in a situation where it’s Mindy or me, the choice is pretty clear: I have no plans to die for my dog.

We live in an odd age where some people devote their lives and voices to animal rights. If you Google the phrase “legal rights for animals,” you get over 300 million hits—including the vote in Switzerland some years ago to give legal rights and representation to animals. It failed by a lot, but just imagine: the last thing I need is for Mindy to legal representation from a lawyer.

Underlying this fight for animal rights is the idea that there is no difference between human beings and other animals—we’re just a more advanced style of animal that likes to bully and enslave our fellow creatures, and it’s just not fair. One argument is that the fight for animal rights is about raising the value or worth of other species. In reality, what it actually does is diminish the value of mankind, reducing us to just one more accident of evolution with unfair advantages.

So if Jesus were to appear today and say, “The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep,” there’s a segment of the population that would say, “About time! Yes! We should all lay down our lives so that the sheep can live. Maybe we should check out this Jesus, after all.”

That’s still a small minority, though. Most people would still maintain that a shepherd who’s willing to die for his sheep is a little bit nutty. Why? Because people have far greater worth than sheep.

Why do people have far greater worth than sheep? Because God created them to have far greater worth than sheep. He gives them far greater gifts. You carry on conversations -- sheep just say, "baa." You cook gourmet meals -- sheep eat grass. When danger comes, you fight or flee -- sheep get eaten.

So shepherds are worth more than sheep. That's why it makes no sense for a shepherd to die for them. But, if it makes no sense for a shepherd to die for sheep, it makes even less sense for Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to die for you. Why? Because He's worth more than you. To put it another way, He's more worthy than you. He's been around from eternity—you've got less than a hundred years on you and you're slowing down. He's all-powerful—you need help to carry a table across the room. He's all-knowing—you can't remember where you put your glasses. He's present everywhere—you're painfully aware that you can only be in one place at a time, and how dreadfully inefficient that is.

More to the point, He's God—you're not. He's holy—you're not. He's **not** sinful—you are. He doesn't have to die for sin—you do. He's faithful and true. You? Well...let's go with a term from our text. You're a hired hand.

Jesus says, "He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."

Most properly, the hired hand that Jesus speaks of isn't you: He's preaching law about pastors. He's accusing me and telling you to be alert. See, why do hired hands work? Hired hands work to make money—they work to benefit from their labors. In itself, there's nothing wrong with that in the business world: I'm willing to guess that if your employer said, "We want you to keep working, but we've cut your pay to zero," you probably wouldn't be too motivated to show up the following day. If you're choosing between two different job offers, you're going to ask, "Which one benefits me more?" That's how the system works in the business world.

That can't be how it works in the Church. A pastor can't operate like a hired hand. He can't run the Holy Ministry by asking, "Which message will bring the biggest numbers, highest offerings and most personal benefits to me?" If that's how a pastor operates, then his goal is to please people because he wants their support, friendship, contributions, maybe adoration. But pleasing people and pleasing God are two different things. The Lord calls upon His preachers to declare His Law, to accuse people of their sin and call them to repentance. Hired hands don't want to do that—they don't want to make people angry because angry people don't support, befriend, contribute or adore. The Lord sends out His preachers to declare the Gospel, the Good News that salvation is found in Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Hired hands aren't hot on that message either, because it's so scandalous to so many.

Here's the big problem with hired hands. They flee. That might mean that they just leave a congregation when the going gets tough and they flee from the trouble—and it's often trouble they've caused themselves. But sometimes, they flee without leaving: they flee the Word of God and shepherd the sheep with something else, leading the entire flock astray. When the wolf comes, there is no defense because they've left Christ, the Defender, behind.

So Jesus is preaching about pastors, warning you to make sure that your preacher is speaking the Word of God, not what tickles the ears and the ego. Is the temptation to be a hired hand real?

Absolutely. It's a constant temptation, and it is one of the devil's favorite attacks to destroy the faith of pastors and congregations. It's why you pray for pastors in general and for me in particular. It's one of the reasons I thank you for your prayers and desire them.

But enough about pastors. Let's talk about you. You're likewise tempted to be a hired hand; and while that makes sense in the business world (where you actually are hired), it does damage just about everywhere else. For example, if you act like a hired hand in marriage, then you're looking out for yourself rather than your spouse. You're working to be served, not to serve; and that's the marriage killer. You and your spouse didn't hire each other—you pledged faithfulness and love, and that's quite different.

If you act like a hired hand in parenting, well...kids don't pay very well. If you parent in order to enjoy the adoration of your kids, you're going to be a crummy disciplinarian and your kids will suffer for it. If you act like a hired hand when it comes to helping others, then you're only going to help those that have something to offer in return—favours, good feelings, gratitude, whatever. You're going to avoid the grouchy, the repulsive, the people who make you feel bad. That hardly makes you a Christian: unbelievers act like this all the time. So do you. That makes you a hired hand who's saying, "What's in it for me?"

Of course, the greater problem is being a hired hand before God. Hired hands are as near-sighted as they are calculating: they want an immediate payoff rather than the iron-clad guarantee of salvation. So you're tempted to receive the parts of God's Word that you like hearing, and ignoring the parts that go against your preferences or favorite sins. You've got your comfort zones—we all do, and some parts of God's Word are more comfortable than others. That's why you can self-justify your pet sins and get angry at God when He doesn't do things your way. That's what a hired hand does.

So if you think that the difference of worth between sheep and man is vast, the difference between man and God is far, far greater: not just in ability, but in holiness. Sheep, at least, are content to be sheep. They don't get together in the flock and talk about how they'd be a better shepherd. They certainly don't scheme and plot to frame their Good Shepherd and have Him crucified.

No, the gulf of worth between man and God is far greater than the gulf of worth between man and sheep. It's as different as heaven from hell. That's what makes this verse so amazing: "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

2. The Good Shepherd

So what is to be done about this vast gulf between God and man? Here's where the Gospel comes in: God bridges the gap and becomes man. The holy Son of God becomes flesh and is born of Mary. He becomes man to be the Good Shepherd. He becomes man to make you lie down in green pastures and lead you beside quiet waters, to prepare a table before you in the presence of your enemies. He becomes man to restore your soul. But He doesn't restore your soul simply by being the Shepherd. He's also the Lamb. He's the Lamb who's sacrificed for your sins, stricken for your transgressions and bruised for your iniquities. By His stripes, you are healed. By His blood, your sins are cleansed.

The Shepherd doesn't lay down His life for benign, innocent sheep without guile. When He lays it down, He dies the death that the sheep deserve—He takes what they've got coming to them. God condemns the Shepherd for the sins of the sheep. And, strange though it is to our ears, even as He condemns His Son, God also loves His Son for laying down His life for the sins of the sheep.

Many find that a paradox that can't be overcome: how can God condemn His Son for the sins of the world, yet love Him for dying for the sins of the world? Because both Father and Son are one, and they are acting out of love to redeem sinners. They are doing what must be done for your salvation, and don't underestimate what God the Father does in sacrificing His Son for you. Given the choice in this world, would fathers rather die or let their sons die? The answer is pretty obvious. If that's the choice that sinful, selfish fathers make, how much harder is it for God the Father to give His Son up to death—and not just give Him up, but condemn His Son for the sins of the world?! What Father would condemn His Son for the sins of wayward sheep?

That is your salvation: the Shepherd lays down His life for you, and His Father loves Him for it.

Please note: you are saved by God's work, God's love and God's sacrifice. You're **not** saved by your efforts, your adorableness or your good intentions. This is good, because God's love for you is unwavering, and so your salvation is sure. Your efforts vary from day to day—some days, you put more effort in than others. Some days, you're not as adorable as other days. Some days, your intentions aren't very good at all. If salvation was about what the sheep do, you wouldn't have a chance.

But your salvation is about the Shepherd—the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. The nature of the Shepherd and His sacrifice is always pleasing to God. That's what makes your salvation sure.

In fact, the Good Shepherd is risen from the dead and clothes you in His righteousness as He forgives your sins. When God the Father looks at you, He doesn't see ragged wool and reluctant obedience. He sees His Son's righteousness—He sees you without spot or stain or any such thing, because Christ has taken all your sins away.

And how does He do this? You hear His voice, His **Word**. And by that **Word**, He gives you forgiveness and life and salvation. It's by His **Word** that He washes you clean in the still waters of Holy Baptism; and it's by His **Word** that He prepares the table of His body and blood for your salvation. It's by His **Word** that He calls you back from your hired-handedness, calls you to repent of your sin and be forgiven once again. That's what sheep do—they listen to their shepherd's voice.

You hear His voice. And when you ignore or disobey His voice, you repent and trust in His salvation for you. His rest, His peace and His life are for you. Because—wonder of wonders! — the Good Shepherd has laid down His life for the sheep. For you. And because the Good Shepherd has laid down His life for you, you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.