

Today's text is the closest thing to a parable in the Gospel of John; however, we aren't told to whom Jesus is speaking. You have to have read the chapter before today's scripture reading to know that Jesus was addressing the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the Jewish religious leaders of Israel, which included the priests and scribes. A little backstory- in the Gospel of John, Chapter 9, Jesus heals the man born blind on the Sabbath, which violated the Jewish law of working on the Sabbath. The Pharisees are arguing amongst themselves and with Jesus about who Jesus is. They do not know where he comes from and they sure don't believe he is without sin. So they confront the man who was healed and eventually drive him out of the synagogue. Jesus goes and finds this man, as one of his sheep, and asks him who the Son of Man is and if he believes Jesus is he. The man says that he believes Jesus is the Son of Man. The Pharisees overhear Jesus and the conflict among them is heightened. Jesus again tells the Pharisees who he is, as we move into Chapter 10 of John's Gospel. Jesus tells them that he is the gate and gatekeeper for the sheep. Then Jesus uses an Old Testament metaphor of a shepherd, which we read in Psalm 23, to describe who he is. Remember Moses and David were also shepherds. But to the Jews gathered, God was known as the Good Shepherd. How could Jesus say that he was the good shepherd? Are they to conclude that he was, in fact, God? Talk about escalating the conflict? This is where we find ourselves in today's text. Jesus continues describing who he is saying, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Even though we're in the Easter season, Jesus' resurrection has yet to take place in today's story. Before reading God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ** John 10:11-18.

I'm a preacher and teacher's kid whom God called to become a pastor. Watching some in my dad's generation pastor, I wonder how many were taught that they were to shepherd their flock at all times (24/7) with many ignoring their own health and humanity while some others got caught up in their own egos and illusions of power. Where could they have gotten this idea? The word "pastor" derives from the Latin noun *pastor* which means "shepherd" and relates to the Latin verb *pascere* – "to lead to pasture, set to grazing, cause to eat" ( Harper, Douglas- <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=pastor>). I wonder if it wouldn't be clearer to say that all humans, including pastors, are more like sheep than shepherds. One of my colleagues argues that as pastors, we are a part of the flock and if we need an identifier...maybe we're more like sheepdogs? We are trained to help guide, watch over, sometimes disturb and hopefully move sheep, but we aren't the Shepherd. Not too long ago, I was asked to participate in a worship service welcoming a new pastor to serve a church. I invited her to remember that she wasn't Jesus, the Good Shepherd. It may sound silly to even acknowledge the obvious; nevertheless, we all need those reminders. In John's Gospel, we're told that there is only one Shepherd, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

It's important to remember when Jesus uses the metaphor of shepherds and sheep, he was speaking to people who had everyday experiences with sheep. Most of us haven't spent much time with sheep. I heard a story the other day about a farmer and expert sheep breeder in the Midwest who entered some of his sheep into a competition at a county fair about twenty years ago. This farmer stepped away from his sheep for a few minutes and upon returning found

his sheep gone. Someone had stolen them. The farmer didn't want to place blame on anyone, but he had a sneaking suspicion who had stolen his sheep. So he waited a few weeks until the next county over had their fair, and he went. As soon as he began calling for them, his sheep started crying, and he recognized their cry- locating them right away. When asked how the farmer knew those were his sheep, he responded, "I know my sheep, and they know me." In the same way, God through Christ knows each one of us. Jesus knows his own and his own know him, just as the Father knows him and Jesus knows the Father (John 10:15). Jesus chooses to be in relationship with us, just as he is in relationship with the Father. How comforting to know our Lord...our Shepherd knows us and does not abandon us in our times of need.

Robbie Boman, who led prayers on Wednesdays here in this sanctuary last fall and has led them here several years before, wrote a book entitled, *Miracles of South Carolina*. In it she begins with a story about a woman she met here at Triune one Wednesday morning. Robbie asked her what her name was and if she wanted a Bible. She told Robbie her name was Angel and then she said, "Yes, I want a Bible. I want a new start, I want to start over." Robbie writes that Angel was tired of being on drugs. As they made their way down these aisles, Robbie could feel Angel become more at peace. Robbie opened the door to the choir room- where the donated Bibles were kept. The first Bible was too tattered and the letters were unbelievably small and hard to read. Robbie thought that this lady deserved better, so she put that Bible to the side. The second Bible Robbie picked out wasn't in much better shape and so she grabbed a third Bible. Robbie opened it while Angel looked on and written in pencil with capital letters across

the front two empty pages were the words, "Welcome Home, Angel." Stunned, Angel said nothing. Robbie said, "Clearly, Angel, this one's for you. God sure knows you and knows you are here. This is amazing. Take it." Overcome with emotion, Angel hugged her precious cargo and dropped to her knees, sobbing muffled prayers and personal confessions as she sat on this very floor (pp. 2-3). The Good Shepherd not only knows us but he also prepares each place we enter before we ever arrive. As we're reminded in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, even in the deepest pains of rejection and abandonment in the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is our Shepherd and does not leave us to walk alone. No wonder this powerful and comforting image of God is the most requested to be read at the death bed or at funerals. We all need reminding that God loves, cares for, gathers, knows and sets us on his shoulders with endearment- never forsaking us.

Jesus makes it clear here that he is not the hired hand but the good shepherd. Unlike the hired hand, Jesus loves and cares for the sheep and will not run away when the predator attacks but gives his life to protect and save the sheep. Jesus must really want to make this point as he says that he freely lays down his life for his sheep five times in these few verses. This shepherd intimately cares about each sheep, especially the lost one, and wants the flock to flourish as a whole. His love even extends to the sheep in other folds. Jesus says, "I have other sheep who 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" (John 10:16). Who are "the other sheep?" Most scholars believe that "the other" are more than likely Gentiles but no one is absolutely sure. Are "the other" as simple as the people we don't really know or don't value or don't acknowledge the reflection of Christ in

because they look different or make poor choices or vote the other party? Who is “the other” for you? The “other sheep” in today’s text leave the door open to us as readers/hearers of the Gospel and also warn against any kind of exclusive claim on the shepherd Jesus.

I must confess that I sometimes struggle more with “the other” as some of the ones already claiming to hear Jesus’ voice and be in THE one fold than I do with the ones yet to hear Jesus’ voice. In February when we we’re recording worship live here in this sanctuary and we weren’t in-person, I began reading the scripture out loud and looked up and there was a man standing at the back door. No one knew him. Cheri went to greet him and to tell him that we weren’t meeting in-person, Cheri later told me that he had taken one look at me and told her, “what kind of church is this anyway with a women behind the pulpit? I know one thing. Y’all aren’t Christians.” When I heard Cheri’s recap of what happened, I was reminded of what can be a personal roadblock for me to fully experiencing one flock, one shepherd. This man, with good intentions, has had experiences in churches where women aren’t allowed to preach. At times it can be exhausting not to be able to hide my gender, as it can create tension for some folks. In the past twenty or so years, I have been commented about or simply dismissed because of my gender and calling to serve as a pastor. I can’t begin to imagine what it’s like for people who live on the margins or in fear everyday based on things that they cannot change- such as the color of their skin or their ethnicity or their sexuality. I’ve been quoted several of the same scripture passages- even in the grocery store or in emails- that say I’m not abiding by God’s word because I’m a female and in leadership in the church. When in a good place, I say

something like “everyone is entitled to their interpretation or opinion. You’re a beloved child of God as well.” But when you catch me on a bad day, it might be more like “I can’t believe that we listen to the same voice of the Good Shepherd because we read scripture so differently. Are you sure, Jesus, you meant what you said about one flock? I get the one shepherd part but one flock?” These folks can sometimes represent “the other” for me. “At stake as followers of Christ is how far mutual love requires us to bend and change in order to be united to our other brothers and sisters, those outside our fold” (Preaching God’s Transforming Justice, p. 221). “Deciding who is in and who is out is really not the business of the sheep and is a mystery to them. We sheep-folk are told only to cleave to Jesus, to love, and to testify, as Jesus makes explicit in later chapters of John” (Meda Stamper 2015, workingpreacher.org). We sheep-folk are also called to seek justice, to forgive and to hold one another accountable for how we treat our neighbors.

If anyone has the power and love to lay down his life and to bring diverse folds into one flock, it’s God through Jesus, the good Shepherd. God’s grace, redemption, and love enter our lives in mysterious ways, especially in the midst of our own brokenness. Here Jesus invites us all to our deepest place of belonging, guiding us with tenderness and helping us to trust in an abiding eternal hope. The relationship between the sheep and the shepherd is based on what the shepherd does and who the shepherd is, not vice versa. As sheep, we are called to love because God first loved us. Mutual love requires us to bend and change in order to be united to our other brothers and sisters in Christ no matter who they are or what they look like. One beloved Flock, One Loving Shepherd. The Lord is my

shepherd... the Lord is your shepherd and the Lord is the other's shepherd- all in one flock. We are all in desperate need of the Good Shepherd. May we listen for his voice and may the love of God compel us to be open to the other as well.

Amen.