

“The Good Shepherd”

John 10:1-21

8/5/18

Amy Wenninger is one of the women who came with us on our Mexico mission trip. She lives on a small farm in Virginia with her husband and two daughters. They have a variety of animals, including horses, chickens, quail, and various dogs and cats. Amy decided that it would be good for her daughters to have a couple sheep to look after, so early this spring, she drove a couple hours, picked up a ewe and two lambs, and carried them and her daughters home in her Subaru wagon.

She had done some research on sheep, but quickly discovered they were unlike any other animals she had ever raised. Other animals have a strong will to live and they work hard to avoid situations that may be dangerous to them. Not sheep. They will wander off and fall in ditches, and when they fall on their backs, they often have no way to right themselves. They also have a habit of eating and drinking things that will kill them. According to Amy, they seem to lack the common sense to survive! With this background, let's listen to Jesus' words from the beginning of John 10.

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by

name and leads them out. ⁴*When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.* ⁵*They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”* ⁶*Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. (John 10:1-6)*

This is the only parable of Jesus that John includes in his gospel, although the other gospels are filled with them. The metaphor of shepherds and sheep representing God and his people is very common in the Old Testament. The well-known 23rd Psalm begins, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Isa. 40:11 reads, “*(The Lord) will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.*” (Isa. 40:11) The metaphor is an apt one, for the sheep are absolutely dependent on the shepherd to lead them to grass and water, to keep them away from cliffs and ledges, and to protect them from predators and thieves. Being a shepherd requires vigilance, courage, and patience.

Here, Jesus contrasts true shepherds and false shepherds. But, just who are the false shepherds that Jesus has in mind? They could be kings like the Herods, who sold out God’s people by closely allying themselves with the occupying Romans. They could be revolutionary leaders like the

Zealots, who favored violent overthrow of the Romans. But most likely they are religious leaders like the Pharisees, who strictly enforced the law, but refused to acknowledge how God was working through Jesus. As the people listened to this parable, they were unable to understand it. So Jesus explains it to them. Let's pick it up in verse 11.

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The 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. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No 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."

Let's look at three important points in this passage that have significant implications for how we live in the flock of the Shepherd. Jesus begins this section by saying, "*I am the good shepherd.*" This is one of half

a dozen “I am” statements Jesus makes in John’s gospel. Previously, we heard Jesus say, “I am the bread of life,” and “I am the light of the world.” Here, Jesus claims to be the good shepherd, as opposed to thieves who care nothing about the sheep, and hirelings, who only care about the sheep because they are paid to do so. In contrast, the good shepherd genuinely cares about the sheep. The sheep know his voice, and he knows them by name.

Even in Palestine today, sheep from different flocks are often mixed together at a source of water. Shepherds are able to call their sheep out of those mixed flocks using their voices or flute-like instruments, and their sheep and only their sheep will leave the larger flock and follow them! My friend Amy tells me that when she comes to the pasture and calls her sheep, they will come to her, but they run away from her husband! As you can imagine, he doesn’t appreciate that!

If Jesus is the good shepherd and we are his sheep, how do we recognize his voice today amidst the many voices that vie for our attention? Insistent voices from advertisers, cultural voices telling us what’s really important, political voices preying on our fears, family voices from our past as well as our present, and a wide variety of religious voices. In times past, Christians have been deceived by confusing the voice of Jesus with the voices of despots in places like Nazi Germany and more recently in some

African and South American countries. So again, how do we recognize Jesus' voice among those other voices?

Real sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd by developing a relationship with the shepherd over time. Since sheep in the Middle East were primarily raised for wool, they would be with their shepherd for a good length of time and they would get to know one another well. I think we, as Jesus' sheep, can also develop an ability to recognize his voice over time, as we study his Word in the Bible, as we listen to how others are discerning his voice in worship and in fellowship, and as we pray and listen to him regularly. Just being one of his sheep doesn't guarantee that we will recognize his voice. We need to develop the ability to do that with the help of the Holy Spirit.

And don't forget the good news back in verse 3 that the shepherd knows each sheep by name! God knows everything about you, including your name, your talents and abilities, your weaknesses and failures, the tragedies in your life, as well as your fears and hopes. And with this intimate knowledge of our best and our worst, God still loves us as part of God's flock! That is good news that should cause us to give thanks and also to relax a little bit!

Second, notice verse 16. *¹⁶I 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. (John 10:16) Who are these “other sheep?” They are the Gentiles, who would soon be added to the existing flock of Israel, God’s chosen people. This would have been an astonishing idea to good Jews of that day. But, it was exactly what happened, as many Gentiles believed in Jesus in the early decades of the church, and were added to God’s flock. And we non-Jews have continued to be welcomed by Jesus today.

Finally, notice that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus makes it clear that he does this willingly, not because anyone forces him to do so. He does this because he loves the Father, who loves the sheep! This is a clear indication of what is to come for Jesus later in John’s gospel; He will allow himself to be crucified as he takes on the sin of the world on our behalf. This is the core of the gospel message, and a wonderful gift to each and every one of us. The forgiveness he bought for us on the cross is an important part of what we remember when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, which we will do in a few minutes. It is all about grace!

But these verses also remind us that Jesus’ death on our behalf is not the end of the story! Jesus says that he willingly lays down his life for the sheep, but that he can also raise it up again. That, of course, is the message of Easter. That sin and death do not get the final word, but that

Jesus demonstrated by his own resurrection that ultimately God's love for us will overcome sin and death, so that we also will be resurrected in God's time.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper together, ask God to help you recognize his voice, and thank God that the Good Shepherd gave his life for you.