



John 10:1-18 - "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. ¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep 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 are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

The Good Shepherd Tends His Flock

-He gave his life

-He gives his victory

-He will always give his care



*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)*

Has anyone ever compared you to an animal? If you heard someone say, “Boy, that guy is a real shark,” you’d probably think he was ruthless or aggressive. Maybe you’ve heard someone called a weasel or a fox, because they’re sly and deceptive. When you were a kid, standing in line at the drinking fountain after recess and one child was taking his sweet time and you heard from the back of the line, “That kid drinks like a camel!” We’ve all probably encountered a gentle giant who looks mean and intimidating but is really...a big teddy bear. OK, so a teddy bear isn’t a real animal, but the point is clear. Animals have characteristics we see in humans as well. Owls are supposedly wise and sloths are lazy. Sometimes being compared to an animal can be a compliment, other times, not. What would you take it to mean if someone called you a sheep? Sheep aren’t especially known for their strength, bravery, or beauty. Instead, they’re better known for being dull knives in the silverware drawer of the animal kingdom. Sheep follow. Sheep get lost and have a hard time finding their way back. Sheep are helpless without their shepherd. Today, as we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, we see that we are all sheep; but sheep of the Good Shepherd. And the Good Shepherd tends his flock. He gave his life. He gives his victory. He will always give his care.

Consider the illustration Jesus uses in our gospel lesson this morning. He uses a picture that has become so familiar in the Christian church, that today we have a Sunday in the church year dedicated to it: Good Shepherd Sunday. So let’s explore this sheep/shepherd dynamic. Although sheep are generally pretty docile and vulnerable creatures, the dangers they face are anything but. Wolves attack the flock for a quick meal. Treacherous terrain stretches before them as they slowly march toward better grazing and fresh water. As the human leader of this flock of sheep, the shepherd constantly puts himself in harm’s way all for the good of his flock. Any shepherd worth his salt knew that his sheep were his livelihood. When a pack of wolves attacked and the choices on the menu were shepherd or sheep, the decision to stand between the enemy and the helpless wasn’t always so easy. After all, a shepherd’s life is far more valuable than a sheep’s life. If that’s true of a human shepherd, think of how astonishing it is to hear what Jesus, the Son of God, has to say.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” A shepherd might risk his life to protect the flock, because if his sheep were doing well, that meant financial stability for the shepherd. So, in that regard, the sheep had something to offer the shepherd. But what value do we have to offer Jesus? Nothing. As we heard before, sheep aren’t always the smartest animals. They’re easily distracted by choice tufts of green grass. As they plod along in the pasture they might see a little grass here...and eat it. Oh, there’s some more...and a little more over here, and so on. Before you know it, the sheep has nibbled his way away from the safety of the flock and the shepherd’s care. Isn’t that how sheep of the Good Shepherd go astray? Very rarely would a sheep take a running start and jump off a cliff. Instead, little by little, nibble by nibble, as he follows his own desires and ignores his shepherd’s voice, he finds himself with two feet on solid ground and two feet dangling over the edge. Straying from the flock is usually a gradual process. Human sheep can become comfortable with sin in much the same way. Little by little, nibble by nibble, sin doesn’t taste so bad. The threats of the law become empty words. Thoughts that were once abominable and poison to our souls are common fare for the day. Intentions of serving and loving my neighbor dissolve into “Ah, he’ll do his thing and I’ll do mine.” Putting off sin can wait for another day. Little by little, nibble by nibble, we turn from the Shepherd and march toward destruction.



The prophet Isaiah was right, **“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”** The wandering of the sheep results in death. But Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down his life for you – his sheep. He faced head on the attack of the wolves of death and hounds of hell so that you wouldn’t have to. There’s nothing good in the sheep that leads the Shepherd to make this sacrifice. This is simply the Shepherd’s love. Jesus said, **I lay down my life, only to take it up again.** Our Good Shepherd didn’t lay down his life as an end in itself. He took it up again, rising from the dead. What a marvelous exchange he makes – he takes the sin and death that were rightfully ours and in their place he gives us his perfect victory.

When Jesus spoke the words of this “Good Shepherd sermon” it was about six months before his death. These words about a Shepherd’s sacrifice foreshadow what was going to take place in the days to come. Months before Jesus was betrayed and handed over to suffer and die, he showed in vivid illustration that even these things were all a part of his plan. This is how he would obtain victory. The victory of our Good Shepherd is won in what looks like utter defeat. In the coming dark days of Jesus’ suffering, the disciples would seriously begin to question who was in charge. They had seen the miracles of Jesus. They heard him speak about the coming Kingdom of God. But when their Teacher was arrested and put on trial for his life, things seemed to be so upside down. *“What about all those promises, Jesus? Where is this kingdom you talked about?”* Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has everything under control. **I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.** Even though it looked like Jesus was under the control of a sly Jewish high priest and an ignorant Roman governor; even though it looked like Jesus had been utterly defeated, this was how he won the ultimate victory.

The life that Jesus lived, laid down, and took up again with his resurrection holds the promise of salvation for all who believe – even those who were **not of this sheep pen**, the Gentiles. Jesus said, **I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.** That’s where we come into the picture. Our Good Shepherd never intended for his victory to be reserved for only one nation of people. Rather, ALL nations would be blessed through him. Wherever the gospel of forgiveness in Christ is preached, there the Holy Spirit brings more sheep into the one flock, the Church – The U.S, Africa, India, China. These sheep listen to the voice of their Good Shepherd. They trust in their Good Shepherd who rose from the dead so that he could continue to be their Good Shepherd and care for them no matter what life may bring.

In order to appreciate the care a shepherd gives to his sheep, it might help to know something about sheep...about which I know very little. Growing up in the city of West Allis, WI, I was more surrounded by streets and suburbs than I was by sheep and shepherds. But one image that sticks in my mind about the care of the Good Shepherd for his sheep was from my childhood years. You see, the name of my home church and elementary school right next door was *Good Shepherd’s Lutheran*. And every day on my walk into school, I passed by a wall sized mural, showing Jesus as the Good Shepherd with his sheep. I must’ve walked by that picture a thousand times, but never really grasped the true beauty of what it was saying. The picture showed Jesus surrounded by all the different sheep, but there was one sheep, one little lamb that Jesus held in his arms, close to his heart, not even an inch removed from his loving care.



That's where you live and move and have your being as sheep of the Good Shepherd: safe in the arms of Jesus. Listen to your Savior as he tells you, **"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."** Just what does a shepherd know about his sheep? He knows which ones are old or sick. He knows which ewes are soon to give birth. He knows which sheep keep pace and which lambs lag behind. He knows which sheep struggle with the tasks of life and the pulls of temptation. Jesus knows his sheep. He's not some far removed leader and his sheep are not just faceless fleece in a flock. He knows you by name, and through faith, you know him. Just what does your Good Shepherd know about you? In short, everything. He knows your needs, your fears, your struggles. He knows the pull of temptation you face. He knows the losses you've endured. He knows you. Not only does he know all these things; he takes care of them.

But when the wolves of this world come to attack us, and we're feeling the pressures of this life weighing down on us, we're tempted to think that our Shepherd has abandoned us. *"Where are you when I need you, God? How do you expect me go on living happily as your little lamb when my family is falling apart? Why can't I feel your Shepherd care when I don't see any way I can make ends meet this month? When it's my aging parent who doesn't recognize the face of her children? Or when it's my loved one who has a chronic condition that won't ever get better? How can I sing, I am Jesus' little lamb, ever glad at heart I am, when it's my spouse who has passed through the valley of the shadow?"* Where is our Good Shepherd when we need him most? He's right where he wants to be found, standing beside us in his Word and Sacraments.

Every time you read his Word, you hear the familiar voice of your Good Shepherd. Whenever you see the font, you remember the promise your Good Shepherd made to you. **My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.** Where is your Good Shepherd when you need him? He comes to you in the bread and the wine of his Supper: my body, my blood shed for you, my sheep. With his continued care, he assures you that you're not a helpless victim of all the pressures of life, you're actually victorious in him. You're not enslaved or defined by the heartaches that fill your eyes with tears; you are his sheep. You're not destined to lose because a wicked world flexes its muscles; no one and nothing can snatch you from his hands.

This is how the Good Shepherd tends his flock. He gave his life, the righteous for the unrighteous to bring us to God. He gave his victory, so that we are sharers in the triumph of Easter. He continues to give us his care, because he knows his sheep. So live in peace knowing that you are a sheep in the flock of the Good Shepherd who gave his life, gives his victory, and will always give his care – all for you, the lamb held securely in the arms of your Savior.

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

(Jude 24-25)