

4th Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2021
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
John 10:11-18
The Good Shepherd

John 10:11–18

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. The reason my Father loves me is that 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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

If you could be compared to any animal, what would you choose? Maybe the wise owl or the majestic eagle. Perhaps you think of the speed and power of the big cats of this world or the intelligence of the wolf as it leads its pack in a hunt. Or maybe you would go for the busy bees or industrious ants. I could even stand to be compared to a squirrel. Squirrels store up food in the fall and find it months later. They have sharp claws and can climb trees to escape predators. But our God compares us mostly to sheep. Sheep don't have sharp claws or teeth to defend themselves. They are not particularly fast. They can't fly or climb trees. It would be difficult to credit a sheep with wisdom or intelligence. Sheep don't store up food for themselves and need someone to watch over them so they don't starve, get eaten or fall into a hole.

I might like to be compared to nearly any other creature on this planet, but God knows what he is saying. We are very much like sheep. We cannot defend ourselves from the devil who wants to devour us. We cannot run from the sinful world that wants us to join in its evil. We do not have the wisdom to avoid the holes and traps of temptation. On our own, humans fill ourselves with the poisoned food and drink of idolatry and false religions. When it comes to spiritual matters, we are helpless, easy prey for the wolf. The best thing that can happen to us is for the Holy Spirit to convince us through the Bible that we are sheep. For once we realize what we are, we know who we need. We need a shepherd – but not any shepherd. We need the Good Shepherd. Jesus tells us today that he is the Good Shepherd. The section of Jesus' words before us focus on two things the Good Shepherd does for his sheep. He lays down his life for the sheep and he knows the sheep.

Lays Down His Life for the Sheep

Allow me to read a shortened version of God's Word for today so you can hear Jesus' emphasis in this section of Scripture from John 10.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep....I lay down my life for the sheep....The reason my Father loves me is that 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.

In eight verses, Jesus says that he lays down his life five times! When a teacher repeats something many times, either the teacher is forgetful or what he said is going to be on the test. You should probably write it down! When Jesus says that he lays down his life for the sheep five times we know this is really important.

The reason Jesus has to lay down his life is tied up in the image of the sheep. When the wolf attacks, the sheep have almost no defense. The only hope one sheep has is that it is faster than another and the wolf is satisfied with killing one sheep for dinner that night. We have less hope than a sheep against a wolf because of our sins. Wandering from God's Word is not just unwise but earns for us eternal death. But instead of allowing his sheep to wander into the eternal abyss of hell, the Good Shepherd laid down his life for us. He suffered in our place. He died in our place. He did what was necessary to save his sheep. Thanks be to our Good Shepherd who laid down his life to give us eternal life!

And he did so willingly.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I once had a medical student tell me the advice of his father, also a doctor. It was something like, "If you want to be a doctor for the money, don't be a doctor." That is good advice for just about any career. I would prefer a doctor who cares more about helping people than one who sees each patient as a dollar sign. I want an auto mechanic who cares about fixing my cars so they are safe to drive instead of one who only cares about the profit margin on the parts he sells. I prefer a retail clerk who cares about helping the customer find something that one who is just putting in the time to get a paycheck. Jesus is calling out the spiritual leaders of the Jews – the Pharisees, Sadducees and priests – who cared more about their positions and the money and power that came with their positions than they cared about the people. Jesus is not like such shepherds.

Our Good Shepherd cares about the sheep. He does not care for the sheep because "that's his job" or to get any kind of reward. He truly cares for us sinners. Christ has no competing motives for caring for us. He loves his Father and cares for us sinners so much that he is willing to do anything for us, even lay down his life. Of course, on this 4th Sunday of Easter, we also remember that our Good Shepherd did not remain in the tomb for long. He was willing to die to free us from sin and he has the power and authority to take us his life again and does. Therefore, our Good Shepherd continues to shepherd us even now.

Knows His Sheep

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

We may hide our weaknesses from even close friends and family members but our Good Shepherd knows every weakness. He knows what temptations are the biggest traps for us. He knows our deepest and darkest secrets. He knows our fears and our worries. He knows everything about us. This might scare us if Jesus was just any shepherd. The human spiritual leaders who were suppose to shepherd God's people would use such knowledge against the sheep.

But Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He forgives our sins, even the ones no other human knows about. He is our strength in those many situations where he knows we are weak. He takes our deepest and darkest secrets and buries them forever by his death, never to hold them against us again. Jesus knows everything about us and still he lays down his life for us, still he cares for us, still he shepherds us. May we never be led to think that our Savior will abandon us because he finds out who we really are. He is our Good Shepherd who knows us and does all for our good.

Who does our Good Shepherd care for and know like this?

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.

This was a shock to many of the Jews – that the Savior from God was for more than the Jewish people. It was shocking to hear that Jesus would gather the Gentiles and the Jews together into one sheep pen. But Jesus did it anyway. For our Good Shepherd is not the Savior of the Jews only. He laid down his life for all people. Therefore all are united under the one Good Shepherd in one flock.

We are blessed in our little congregation to have a small picture of this sheep pen of our Good Shepherd. We have believers here from far off places like Nebraska, Minnesota, Missouri, Illinois and even Wisconsin. We have believers here who came from Yugoslavia (now Croatia) and Austria, from Eritrea, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya and from China. Let me know if I missed someone but I think we are only missing believers from three continents: South America, Australia and Antarctica. Of course, we have some big differences in language and culture and history. But we are all sheep of our Good Shepherd. Christ unites all believers into one flock. Cherish this unity now and look forward to the gathering of all believers around the throne of our Good Shepherd in heaven. Jesus knows his sheep and he will gather all of his sheep into his sheep pen. Not one will be missing.

We have a Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us, cares for us, knows us and gathers all believers into his flock forever. With a Good Shepherd like Jesus, I guess it is not so bad to be compared with a sheep after all.

Amen.