

THE GOOD SHEPHERD
St. Paul's, Minneapolis
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John 10:11-18
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If you were here last Sunday, you may remember Pastor Tom saying that sheep aren't dumb; they know their shepherd's voice, they recognize that voice and will only follow him. But I have to beg to differ a bit. Sheep are dumb, in some life-threatening ways.

If you're driving in rural Senegal, you're going to find animals near the road or on it, especially sheep and goats. When goats see a vehicle coming, they run off to the side of the road. Sheep, on the other hand, are just as likely to run onto the road. It just goes to illustrate what the Bible says: sheep without a shepherd are a problem. They are likely to get themselves in life-threatening danger.

In today's text Jesus says, "I AM the good shepherd." (Read John 10:11-15) Most Christians today probably hear that as a pleasant metaphor. We picture Jesus gently carrying a little lamb. We hear him promising to guide us and take good care of us.

But the people in Jesus' audience—Pharisees, his own disciples, the blind man he just healed—especially those who knew the Scriptures well, understood that he was claiming much more than that. They realized Jesus was claiming a role that Israel's God had claimed for himself.

The Old Testament is full of descriptions of God's people as his flock of sheep and of God as their shepherd. Here are just a few examples: Psalm 100:3, Psalm 80:1, Isaiah 40:10-11.

But Ezekiel's words might have been uppermost in some minds. Ezekiel had denounced Israel's corrupt leaders at the time of Israel's captivity in Babylon. God spoke through Ezekiel, "As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep... Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD." (Ezekiel 34:8,11,15)

And Micah the prophet, prophesied that the Messiah would "stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God." (Micah 5:4).

Jesus is saying: "I AM doing what God told you He would do. I am doing what the promised Messiah will do." Jesus is in fact "making himself equal with God," as his enemies accused him of doing. "I AM the good shepherd" doesn't just paint a pretty picture. It's Jesus' most dramatic public claim yet to be divine and to be Israel's Messiah.

What does it mean that Jesus is our good shepherd? Read John 10:11-12

There are a couple of key points here that are easy to gloss over. First, the contrast between the good shepherd and the hired hand in how they react to danger. Why doesn't the shepherd run away when he sees the wolf? Because the sheep belong to him. He owns them. They are his possessions. He's not just watching them for someone else.

And the second point-- the good shepherd "lays down his life for the sheep." This goes beyond what we learned last Sunday about how the shepherd lay at the door of the sheep pen at night to keep predators out. It goes beyond taking risks to protect the flock.

(Read John 10:16-18.) In just 8 verses of John chapter 10, Jesus mentions laying down his life 5 times, and taking it up again, 2 times. We are meant to connect the dots. Jesus is talking about his death and his resurrection.

How does a shepherd build his flock? He buys them. That's why they belong to him.

It's by laying down his life that Jesus obtains his flock. If you are one of Jesus' flock, it's because Jesus has bought you at the cost of his own life. You don't just choose to sign on with Jesus as a free-agent sheep. No; as Paul writes: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So

glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Again Paul writes that Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:1). Peter echoes the same line: “You were ransomed...not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

But it's Jesus who owns us, not other people. Paul writes: “You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.” (1 Corinthians 7:23). Jesus is our shepherd, our Lord and master, not other people. We do belong to one another, but only in and through him.

This biblical truth, that Jesus has bought us, is one big reason why so many modern people have a kind of gut-level antipathy to Jesus. His claims about himself and about us cut straight through our culture's dominant sense of ourselves as autonomous individuals. An autonomous person is, literally, one who is a law unto him or herself.

Now, autonomy is a useful principle in economics and politics and international relations, but nowadays it has become how we think about every aspect of personhood.

This was expressed by Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy in a 1992 opinion: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the meaning of human life.” Liberty means my right to think, believe and do as I please.

This attitude dominates modern culture, but it is not new in human history. It's just today's version of the serpent's lie to Eve: “You'll be like God. You can decide good and evil for yourself.” It's also a peculiarly modern form of idolatry.

But if the truth that Jesus has bought us repels secular unbelievers, it can be a problem for Christians, too. It has not sunk in that we are not our own, that we've been bought with a price. When it comes to following Jesus, most of us have to work hard to shed the autonomy thinking that we have assumed and absorbed as 21st century people. It's how our culture has taught us to define ourselves as human beings.

When it comes to faith and commitment to Jesus, this default assumption of our autonomy makes it easy to reserve to ourselves what I will call “the right to stray.”

Right-to-stray Christianity is not what Jesus wants as our relationship to him.

We like the story Jesus told about the shepherd who leaves his ninety-nine sheep to look for the one who is lost somewhere out in the wilderness. We celebrate the return of the one lost sheep which brings so much joy. But there's a cost to that merciful search and rescue. The cost is the shepherd laying down his life. There's an old gospel song that tells the story of the lost sheep in poetry and music. One verse brings home this matter of the price the shepherd pays to retrieve his strays:

“Lord, whence are those blood-drops all the way

That mark out the mountain's track?”

“They were shed for one who had gone astray

Ere the Shepherd could bring him back.”

“Lord, whence [why] are Thy hands so rent and torn?”

“They're pierced tonight by many a thorn.”

The price of our retrieval was included in the original price of our purchase, so to speak.

Let's pray that our inevitable failures and strayings will be stumbles and accidents, not exercises of an imaginary right to stray.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have ransomed me from the power of sin and death at the cost of your own sinless life, with the price of your own precious blood. I belong to you. You are my Good Shepherd. I renounce my “right to stray” from you. Give me grace to hear and recognize your voice, and to follow when you call me. Amen.