

Sermon Theme: What Makes the Shepherd Good

Sermon Text: John 10:11-18

Maybe you aren't like me, but I find job interviews to be nerve-racking and a bit unpleasant. Something about those questions of what's your best attribute, what would your friends say is a struggle you have, what makes you think you would be a good fit here—really trying to sell yourself—just rub me the wrong way. But for some jobs, the interview is an important process for the welfare of the business. Understandably, it can be quite frustrating when you go through the entire process of hiring an individual only to find out they weren't what you were looking for in an employee. And that's the whole point: you want someone who is good for the job. You don't want someone who isn't going to show up when they are needed. You don't want someone who is going to bail out and leave at the first moment of struggle and difficulty. You want someone who will put in the work, time, and effort. If they don't fit the qualifications, it could make life quite miserable for all parties involved. Today see John 10 as Jesus' resume and interview for the job as our shepherd. And from these words we learn what makes the shepherd good.

In verse 11 Jesus sets the tone for what makes him special for this job. He's not just one ordinary shepherd amongst a group of fairly decent shepherds. In the original language Jesus says, "I am the shepherd, the good one." He is saying he is the ideal of what a shepherd should be. And he gives his proof. He, "*lays down his life for the sheep.*" Maybe some of this is lost on us today who have pets are animals in our homes who are treated almost like children. Or, you might understand this better than some knowing that, yes, you take care of your livestock, but in the end they are animals. In Jesus' day, what he says, is strange. It wasn't unheard of for a shepherd who risks his life to defend the animals under his care. David in the Old Testament defended his flock against a bear and lion. But normally a shepherd does not voluntarily sacrifice his life to protect animals. But that's why he is the good shepherd, "*He lays down his life for the sheep.*"

To further show his credentials he lines up the work of the Good Shepherd against the work of the hired hand. Jesus makes it quite clear that the hired hand is not the shepherd. Employers try to instill into the mind of their employees that this is their, the employees' company; they want the employees to take ownership so-to-speak and have that type mentality with their work. But there is always going to be a slight difference between the owner's mindset about the company and the employee. So it is with the hired hand. The hired hand is not the shepherd and, therefore, does not own the sheep. And because he doesn't own the sheep, he can get out of it any time he wants. He's not going to lose anything by running away from danger when it comes.

Now we could possibly argue about the whole business ethics of the situation. But the truth is that the hired hand is acting quite rationally. His life is worth more than that of an animal. If you have worked in a retail or convenience store before—like Shopko or at a gas station—you’ve probably been told that if someone comes in trying to rob the store, you let them rob the store and then call the police. Don’t try and be a hero; your life is worth more than the merchandise. Yes, the sheep are cute and cuddly and they are the livelihood of the shepherd. But they are just sheep. The hired hand sees there is no need to play hero; his life is worth more than the merchandise. So when he sees the wolf coming he runs, abandoning the sheep. On top of that, because he is the hired hand, Jesus says, he cares nothing for the sheep. At the end of the day, he’s in it for the money, for the paycheck and nothing more.

Jesus doesn’t share these words to give us a lesson in running a business. When Jesus is first speaking these words, he very well may be referring to the Pharisees and religious leaders of his day. They were supposed to be taking care of God’s flock, the people of Israel, making sure to lead them in maintaining their relationship with God. But instead the leaders were more focused on themselves. In broader understanding the hired hand also refers to anyone who is supposed to be taking care of the sheep—God’s people. But instead maybe they are more concerned for the money, popularity, status, position among others, or, quite simply, themselves. So when the devil comes with this sinful world and all its temptations, struggles, and difficulties, instead of standing up against them and defending God’s people, they just allow the attack to happen and do nothing. They may convince themselves they have the flock’s best interest in mind. But the reality is that they are more afraid of losing their status, position, hurting their personal relationships with others, than the people’s relationship with God. So they will ignore the wolves of false teaching, blatant sin; not want to do what is unpopular and against the crowd. They don’t have to leave to abandon the flock. By not doing anything, they accomplish that already.

This isn’t just speaking to leaders of congregations. This is speaking to all people who are supposed to be taking care of God’s sheep. There are higher expectations for some more than others which may come from different, more public settings or the number of sheep under them. But each of us—to a point—is responsible for watching out for the spiritual welfare of ourselves and each other. God calls us to encourage one another as we wait for Jesus’ return.

This abandoning of the sheep is a terrible situation because it leaves the sheep defenseless. As sheep, we are in danger against those wolves that seek to destroy God’s people. At the head of that wolf pack is the devil followed by the false teachers. Then there are so many different breeds of wolves that threaten us, the small flock of Zion in Valentine. Some are unique to us, but many of the wolves are the same ones that

threaten so many congregations: false teaching, the struggle against this sinful world, budget questions, filling positions, wounded and hurt pride. It doesn't have to be on a spiritual level. Wolves are anything that can come in and split a church; threats to our relationship with our Shepherd Jesus.

But it doesn't stop with that. There are the wolves that threaten you on an individual level that try and pull you away from God and his flock. The struggles of life and difficulties that you endure. There's the wolf of pain you wrestle with and the hurt your loved ones face. There's the wolf of money and paying the bills. There's the wolf of temptations that you personally struggle with and sins you have fallen to in the past. There's so many wolves.

We want to think that we are better than that animal of the sheep that is so defenseless and easily wanders. We want to believe that we have more under our own control and that we can help ourselves. We want to believe that the strong put-together face others see was actually how we felt. We want to believe that we don't need the help of anyone else.

But we are sheep. In the grand scheme of things we have so little under our control. We are sheep who wander after our own whims and desires who are all too easily distracted with chasing after status in life and things that do not last. We are sheep who fall into temptation and are lost in sin on our own.

That is why we need a shepherd. And not just any shepherd will do. We need *the* shepherd; *the* good one. When Jesus says those words "I Am" he isn't just saying them to start describing himself. He is connecting himself and sharing with us that he is the Lord, the God who has no beginning and no end, the gracious and compassionate God, the one true God. Jesus, the Great I Am Lord, is the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep; he knows who belong to him. This means that he has a special connection with them; he knows what you are dealing with, what you are afraid of, what is attacking you. He doesn't hide himself from the sheep but has a relationship with them so that they also know him. This special fellowship that we have with Jesus is compared to the close relationship between the Father and the Son.

And because he is the shepherd, the good one, Jesus lays down his life for the sheep. They belong to him. He's not just in it for the money; he cares about their welfare. This means Jesus cares for you, his sheep. He cares about your well-being. He doesn't take pleasure in seeing the wolves attacking you. He cares for you so much and loves you so greatly—you his sheep—he lays down his life for you. And this is why the Father loves his Son. In order to save the sheep, a lamb had to be led to slaughter—one without blemish or defect. This lamb is Jesus who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That is the same Jesus, the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for you on

that cross to take away your sin and the sin of the world. No one took Jesus' life. He gave it up. He voluntarily sacrificed himself on his own accord. Not even the Father forced him into this action. It was the Father's will so it was Jesus' will and desire.

Now, ordinarily, if a shepherd dies while fending off the wolves, that leaves the sheep still defenseless and doesn't help anything. But Jesus is different. He is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life—only to take it up again. So the laying down of his life actually saves the sheep. Jesus' death on the cross actually saves you from sin. The head of Satan was crushed. Sin was defeated. And when Jesus took his life up again, death was conquered. No one else has the power to do this. No one else has this authority. Jesus does. And Jesus used it to save you. For sheep who wander, who get lost, who fall, shockingly and illogically Jesus lays down his life, picks it up again and saves you, his sheep.

And he wants you to be with him. He says in verse 16, "*I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.*" When he is speaking these words, Jesus is referring to all the non-Jews, the Gentiles, people who were outside of the nation of Israel. That means, God be praised, Jesus laid down his life for us too. And so Jesus leads us to him, Jesus says, "*They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.*" You hear Jesus' voice when you read God's Word, when God's Word is spoken to you. Jesus leads you to him to be part of God's flock to unite us together into one flock, the Holy Christian Church with one Shepherd that is Jesus at its head.

There are still those who are not of this sheep pen. There are still those who have not heard the good news of Jesus that he laid down his life for us and picked it up again. Think of the peace and joy that comes to you knowing that your sins are forgiven. Think of the comfort and hope you have in your Shepherd Jesus. We want to share that. There are those who were part of the sheep pen but have wandered from God's Word. We want to share the love of Jesus inviting them back letting them know that Jesus still wants them part of his sheep pen. We want them to listen to Jesus' voice more and again. And so we want to support the work of this flock, this church, with our time that we share, our talents we use, the money we put in the offerings. With our offerings, with our talents, with sharing Jesus' voice in God's Word we show others what makes the shepherd, your shepherd Jesus, good. Amen.