

1John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
May 3, 2009, 4th Sun. in Easter

Picking up Fallen Sheep

Two ladies from our former home-church traveled to Scotland for a vacation trip. They went on a bus tour of the highlands and countryside. Along the way, they saw many flocks of sheep. The tour guide was very knowledgeable and willing to answer many questions. At one point, one of the ladies asked the guide about a sheep she saw. It was laying on its side. The guide became very concerned and asked where she had seen it. She said she had seen it just recently as they passed one of the numerous flocks. He audibly groaned in sadness. She asked the inevitable “Why?” The guide then explained that sheep are not very intelligent sometimes. When they fall over, they are unable to figure out how to get back on their own four feet. If they are laying on their sides, the shepherd must physically go to the sheep and assist it to stand up again. If the shepherd does not get there in time, the sheep can suffocate because it cannot breathe laying on its side.

A shepherd and his/her sheep may be a common sight in Scotland, Ireland, and England. But they are not common sights for most people living in either suburban or urban North America. Sheep are sometimes seen, but not always their shepherds.

Jesus’ words about being the good shepherd in John 10 offer us comfort but not without first describing the cost at which the comfort is bought. Jesus openly identifies Himself, “I am the good shepherd.” In doing this, He emphasizes the rich meaning of Yahweh as Israel’s shepherd, their Ruler,

Protector, Leader, and Caring Companion. Those who hear His voice and come to Him, discover He is good.

Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd because He gives His life for His sheep. This is the reason He is come. He cares for His sheep daily, watching, feeding, and protecting them. In the end, Christ finally deals with their greatest danger, faces the mightiest thief, the evil one, who spreads darkness and disorder through his own servants, the false shepherds. Our Good Shepherd gives His life on the Cross in the last struggle with this enemy and overcomes sin and evil.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep, and they know Him. There is a loving closeness between our Good Shepherd and us, His sheep. The Shepherd knows the weak and the strong, the stubborn and the submissive, the hurts and the needs of every sheep. And the sheep know and trust their Shepherd – every inflection of His voice, the way by which He leads them to His pasture, His courage in the face of danger. He is their Shepherd. This close relationship between Shepherd and sheep is rooted in and modeled after the union between God the Father and His Son.

It is in that understanding love for the sheep that the Shepherd lays down His life. The pain, joy, and healing of His death is so universal and far-reaching that all sheep will hear His voice and come. There will be one Shepherd and one flock. Those who are outside will all be included.

Rev. Roger Fredrikson describes a woman named Anna, a frizzy-haired and anxious visitor to his church who would come forward every several weeks

at a worship service and tell everyone how desperately she wants to be a part of God's church. Her childhood had been filled with anger and trouble. Two of her sons were in prison; her daughter was in rehab. Anna seemed to call Rev. Fredrikson at home during meals or late at night. She called either to vent her anger about the church or to confess her love for everyone in the church. He describes the joy of watching the congregation, cautiously at first, accept her as one of them. Since then, Anna died during surgery to repair her stomach which was badly damaged from a bleeding ulcer. Anna seems to represent so many needy, dispossessed, neglected people who visit various churches. Christ's death reaches out and claims us all!

It seems to be a different story with hired help who have no visible emotional attachment to the sheep. They seem to be more interested in their own goals. They want the caring of the sheep to be at their convenience from 9 to 5 and will run away at the first sign of danger. They are careless, indifferent shepherds who betray the sheep because their own selfish interests come first.

There are those who creep into a community of believers creating and spreading doubt by questioning the authority of the Jesus we know and love and denying the humanness of the Incarnate Son of God.

John's passage is considered a meditation on the death and Resurrection of Jesus with three focuses. First, Jesus Christ, as the Good Shepherd, is contrasted with the hired hand, who has no idea of putting his life at risk for a flock of sheep. What distinguishes the behavior of the Shepherd from that of the hired hand is His care for the sheep. They belong to Him. Tending

the flock is His reason for being and for dying. It is the vocation given by the Father.

Second, the Shepherd says, “I know my own and my own know me.” There is a close relationship binding together Shepherd and sheep in an unexplainable way. There are no strangers in the flock, none who should feel that he or she is unrecognized. Such mutual knowing and closeness indicates the flock is not yet finally gathered; it is open-ended. There are always others who recognize the Shepherd’s voice and enter His fold. Christ welcomes all of us.

Third, in laying down His life for His sheep, Jesus Christ is free, obedient to His Father’s command, and gives His life of His own will. Christ’s freedom is rooted in divine will. What is true for Christ is true for His followers.

It is the nature of love to reach out, to go the limit. Jesus’ entire ministry, from the very beginning, moves toward this final act of obedience, this offering of Himself for the sake of His sheep.

As Jesus has the authority to lay down His life for us, so does He have the power to take up His life again. The laying down and the taking up, the Cross and the Resurrection, are two sides of this redemptive act. This is the mystery of the divine nature of Jesus Christ who is One with God the Father. In everything from His birth through His Resurrection, Jesus Christ is totally obedient to His heavenly Father.

Christ wants us to be obedient to Him as our Good Shepherd. He knows we make mistakes. He knows we sometimes fall down like the sheep in the flock in Scotland. He also knows we, like real sheep, sometimes have trouble picking ourselves up and standing on our own feet. Christ the Good Shepherd gives His life through death on a humiliating Cross for us, His sheep. Christ picks up His fallen sheep, helps us stand up to sin, and saves us from the sin which is all around us. On this Communion Sunday, Christ wants us to partake of the joyous feast He gives so that we may remember His life, death, Resurrection, and His presence in our lives always. May we remember Christ is our Good Shepherd who is beside us always to pick us up when we fall, to keep us safe in His flock, and to listen for and obey His voice. May we do this in remembrance of Him. Amen!