

JOHN 10:11–18. (EHV)

“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired man, who is not a shepherd, does not own the sheep. He sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. Because he works for money, he does not care about 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 also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd. This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life so that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the authority to lay it down, and I have the authority to take it up again. This is the commission I received from my Father.”

Usually we don't want to think of ourselves as sheep. I'm sure you've heard pastors in the past talk about how relatively dumb sheep are, how they put their head down and start grazing and don't really pay attention to much else. And if they're in danger, they don't really have any defense mechanisms other than to bleat, which can make things worse if the wolf or other predator didn't know exactly where they were—now they do.

Even the world has picked up on this. There's a term that's been around for longer than I, but I think it's gained greater popularity during my lifetime, the term *sheeple*, a combination of *sheep* and *people*. It's usually used in a political context to label people belonging to the party or side opposite of the one to which the person using the term belongs. *Sheeple* is used for people who just follow their leader or their favorite talking head blindly and unquestioningly, without thinking critically or weighing for themselves what they have to say. Sometimes the term fits, sometimes it's just used to be ridicule someone's position, but it's never a compliment to be compared to a sheep.

But there is a scenario in which it's not bad to be a sheep, a scenario when it's a good thing to follow someone unquestioningly—if the shepherd is good, if the shepherd truly has an unquestionable character and is completely trustworthy. Today Jesus reminds us that it's a good thing to be a sheep in his sheep pen, because **he is *the Good Shepherd***.

1. He Lays Down His Life for the Sheep

Jesus begins this section by saying that he is the Good Shepherd because the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He then contrasts that with the hired man who does not have the heart of a shepherd. He doesn't own the sheep and is only watching the sheep for the money, and so he doesn't really care about the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. He's concerned about himself, not about the sheep. But Jesus sees the wolf coming and is willing to fight to defend the sheep, even if it means giving up his life.

Isn't this what we ultimately want in every leader? Don't we want parents who truly care about their children and who make decisions that will truly benefit them, even at the expense of their own dreams, yes, parents who would be willing to die for their children? Don't we want officers of the law and judges and government leaders and representatives who aren't just in it

for the money, but who truly care about those they're protecting and representing? Who don't capitulate to bribes or to threats, whether imagined or real?

We only have this perfectly in Jesus. When Jesus saw *the* wolf coming, he didn't care that he would have to literally fight him to the death. He didn't care that it would mean that those closest to him would betray, abandon, and deny him. He didn't care that it would mean extraordinary physical pain. He didn't care that it would mean utter humiliation. He didn't care that it would mean being forsaken by God himself. What he cared about was that, by laying down his life, he would be protecting the lives of his sheep. So he did it.

And isn't it comforting to hear him say, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own"? We talk about the Jewish leaders' and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate's responsibility for Jesus's death, but they couldn't really take Jesus's life from him. We talk about our responsibility and role in Jesus's death, that it was our sins that helped to put him on the cross. But it's not like our sins forced him there against his will. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own." That means that when Jesus died for us, he wanted to. It was ultimately his choice. We shouldn't look at the cross and say so much, "Ah, look at what I've done!" We should more look at the cross and say, "Ah, look at what he has done! Look at how he loves us!"

And of course he didn't just have the authority to lay down his life for us, but also to take it up again, which is exactly what he did—the final and definitive blow to the wolf who wanted to attack and scatter us.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he lays down his life for the sheep.

2. He Knows His Sheep

Jesus is also the Good Shepherd because he knows his sheep, knows them just as the Father knows him. Isn't that amazing that Jesus would lay down his life for his sheep, even though he knows us just as the Father knows him?

When Jesus thinks back on the day he has spent with us, he doesn't just think back on it like one of our friends, family members, or teachers would. He doesn't just think back on what we said out loud or what we did in public. He thinks back on what was going through our heart and mind every second, the motivations behind every move we made. He knows us just as intimately as the Father knows him, and remember, he and the Father are one. The footage of our inner life—would you be willing to share that footage from any day in our life with any person in this room? Jesus has access to all of that footage and is thoroughly acquainted with it, yet he still laid down his life for us!

And having laid down his life for us and having won our trust in him, his intimate knowledge of us comforts us. If he knows every selfish and hateful thought, motivation, word, and deed, then he knows how to rebuke and correct me and lead me to repentance, and he is able to forgive and cleanse me completely. If he knows me in a way no one else does, he understands exactly what I am going through, even when nobody else does. If he knows me completely, he knows exactly what I need. If he knows me completely, he knows exactly how I can be of use to others. He knows when I came into this world, he knows what I have gone through and will go through yet, he knows when I will die. I'm not just a number to Jesus. I don't get lost in the crowd with Jesus. I'm not overlooked or forgotten with him. When I come to him in prayer, he gives me his full, complete, and undivided attention—another reason he knows me so well.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he knows his sheep.

3. He Cares for His Sheep

And finally, Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he cares for his sheep. He doesn't just know his sheep from a distance. He isn't like a spy with a secret camera set up in our hearts which he watches on his laptop screen in his room far away. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me (just as the Father knows me and I know the Father)." He knows us in such a way that we also know him. The way he knows us and cares for us makes an impact and leaves an impression on our hearts and lives so that we also come to know him intimately.

The way he cares for us is also hinted at with these words: "I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd." Jesus is talking about the Gentiles here, the non-Jews whom he would also bring into the sheep pen. But that effort did not begin in earnest until Pentecost, ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven. The Good Shepherd was no longer visibly on earth when he began bringing the other sheep into his sheep pen.

So how did he do it? He did it, and continues to do it, by providing faithful undershepherds who do not care about having the sheep hear their own voice. They simply want to channel the voice and word of Jesus, so that they can gather sheep into the one true sheep pen. Just like the hired man, they don't own the sheep either, but unlike the hired man, they do have the heart of a shepherd, a heart that wants to imitate and point to *the* Shepherd. They might be getting paid for their work, but they're not in it for the money. They care about the sheep, because the Shepherd whom they represent and work for cares about the sheep.

Fellow sheep, please pray for me, pray for our Sunday School teachers, pray for those who shepherd your relatives in other churches, pray for our circuit pastor, pray for our district president and the other district presidents, and pray for our synod president. Pray that this description would be true of us. Pray that we wouldn't run away when the devil threatens with physical hardship or with false teaching, but that we would stand and fight him off with the strength and spirit of the Good Shepherd, willing even to give up our lives in the endeavor. Pray that we wouldn't be in it for the money or for praise from people, but that we would truly care about the sheep in our care. Pray that we're not in the ministry so that our own voice and ideas can be heard, but that we simply want to and do channel the voice of Jesus. Pray that we wouldn't care so much about the organization of our own flock as we care that those in our flock are brought into and kept in the flock of Jesus. Pray that we would live and work in the realization that none of us are the Good Shepherd. There is only one Good Shepherd—Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for us all, only to take it up again.

This is why, as painful as it has been for some of you in the past, you've been able to part with shepherds who have served here and with whom you built strong relationships. You've been able to part because they and you realized that this congregation is not the holy Christian Church, and so if your pastor needed to go somewhere to help bring people in Christ's sheep pen, so be it. You've been able to part because they and you realized that none of them were the Good Shepherd. The Church didn't live and die by them. It lives and dies with Jesus Christ, and you have never lost him—the Shepherd of all shepherds, the Shepherd of all the flock, the Good

Shepherd, your shepherd, who laid down his life for you, who knows you, and who cares for you. Amen.