

“The Shepherd’s Life for the Life of the Sheep” (John 10:11-18)
4th Sunday of Easter, April 21, 2024
St. John Lutheran Church, Massillon OH

Do a Google search for “Good Shepherd” paintings and you will mostly find Jesus depicted having a sheep draped over his shoulders. Others show Jesus with a staff in his hand among a flock of sheep and looking out in the distance for strangers, wolves, or anything that will hurt his flock. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who takes care of his sheep. He loves the sheep. He protects the sheep. And he holds the sheep in his loving arms.

These images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd come from our gospel lesson this morning, John chapter 10:11-18. Would you say that they’re accurate? Does Jesus describe himself as the Good Shepherd who holds the sheep in his arms? Does he depict himself guarding the sheep from danger? Either the danger being wolves, the wilderness, ditches, rocks, and the like?

Now, I’m not saying that the paintings are a false depiction of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He indeed carries us. In other places in John and the other gospels, Jesus does indeed pick children up in order to love and comfort them, and to give them a blessing. He also describes himself as the strong man who protects us from all danger. He loves us in such a way that he will guard and protect us from any evil.

But in our gospel lesson, in what way is Jesus the Good Shepherd? Maybe, just maybe, on this Good Shepherd Sunday, Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd unlike the paintings suggest. I believe, If we hear the Good Shepherd’s voice, he will let us know that he is the Good Shepherd in this way...THE SHEPHERD’S LIFE FOR THE LIFE OF THE SHEEP.

Right off the bat, Jesus says, **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”** It could be said that the mark of the Good Shepherd is that he gives his

life up, or over for the sheep. You could say that the Good Shepherd gives up his life on his own accord. And you could say that the Good Shepherd lays his life down, even though he doesn't have to. From the get-go, what a wonderful description of the Good Shepherd. He's a Good Shepherd because he's laying down his life for the sheep.

But what does Jesus mean with these words? Jesus will explain further as we go along with the text. But these words of Jesus at the beginning of our gospel lesson would be enough for us to ponder for all eternity. But he continues to shed light on what the Good Shepherd looks like and what he does. He contrasts himself to a bad shepherd so to speak. He says that a hired hand is not even a shepherd at all. A hired hand doesn't lay his life in between the devouring wolf, but rather, since he loves his life so much, flees to leave the sheep to be eaten up. The hired hand cares about his own life and not the sheep's.

After Jesus contrasts himself with a hired hand, and that he gives his life for the sheep instead of keeping it for himself and fleeing from the sheep, he repeats his opening statement, **"I am the good shepherd."** But instead of explaining his words by contrast, he says, **"I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."** Jesus lets us know that by knowing him, the Good Shepherd, the sheep have life in his name. This knowing the Good Shepherd is more than the intellect. For even the demons and the devil himself, "know" who Jesus is. Jesus is talking about a knowing that has more to do with closeness and intimacy instead of just head knowledge. Jesus is close with his sheep. He knows all of them deeply and intimately. In the Hebrew language, knowing is closeness. In Genesis, it says that Adam knew Eve. Knowing Eve had more to than just knowing here likes and dislikes. In Genesis, knowing is more than head knowledge. Knowing is most cases is husband and wife language.

So, Jesus, the Good Shepherd knows the sheep very intimately, just like he intimately knows his Father in heaven. And after all, isn't this husband and wife language? Isn't Jesus the Groom and the sheep, his church, the bride? This is how close and intimate Jesus is with his sheep. He knows them by name even! And being connected to the Good Shepherd, the sheep have life. They have life because they are intimately connected to the Good Shepherd who gives his life so that they would gain life in return.

Once again, if these words were all that Jesus spoke of when it came to his depiction of the Good Shepherd, it would suffice. But he continues all the more. He says that there are even more sheep that he knows that are not yet in the fold. And he expresses how he must bring them into the sheep pen. And in doing so, there's one flock with the one Good Shepherd. Jesus is not one of many Good Shepherds, he's the Good Shepherd. He's the one way, the one truth, and the one life!

And Jesus says that the sheep will listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd as he calls them in. Through the laying down of the Good Shepherd's life, therefore drawing all his sheep to himself as he says elsewhere in John's gospel, the sheep have been brought into the loving fold of the Shepherd that which was once closed off. Inside, their lives are secured. No one gets in to steal the sheep. No one has the authority to take the life of the Good Shepherd and then the sheep. The Good Shepherd laid his life down and took it up again, he's in complete control. The wolves have no hold on the sheep once the Good Shepherd has a hold of his sheep.

And now, his sheep, the gathered sheep in the fold of the Church, have life! You have life because the Good Shepherd gave up his own. Your Good Shepherd's life for your life. He laid it down so that you would gain yours back. For like the hired hand, your sinful nature, the enticing and ravenous wolf, the devil, and the world wants to keep it. But in doing so, your life was lost.

But the Good Sheperd laid down his life for you. He laid it down on the cross on Calvary. It's through this sacrifice that makes him the Good Shepherd and it's the means by which the door of the sheep fold is opened for you to enter.

Hear the Good News spoken by the Good Shepherd! His life for yours. Know this! Join yourself to this! Jesus has joined you intimately to himself. Know your baptism well. Know it closely and once again unite yourself with the Good Sheperd in his death on the cross and in the resurrection. For he not only laid down his life, but he raised it up again along with yours as well.

Know all of the Good Shepherd's words of life and salvation as you know the Scriptures intimately. Join yourself to the voice of the One Good Shepherd. It's how he calls you into the sheepfold. It's how he gives you that one life, for he is the life.

And join yourself, know the words of forgiveness in the bread and wine, his body and blood. Join yourself to the body that was laid down on the cross. Join yourself to the blood that was shed for you by his laying down on the cross and being pierced in his hands and feet. All of this is for the forgiveness of your sins. Receive him intimately through the eating and drinking.

The Good Shephard's life for the life of the sheep. That's you and me. Those who are sheep by faith. We are sheep through the means of the Good Shepherd laying down his life. Good Shepherd Sunday is all about the Good Shepherd. He laid his life down for you. Ponder this wonderful picture. Yes, it's okay to picture Jesus holding you in his arms. It's okay to ponder him carrying you over his shoulders as you walk through this life of sin, harassment from the demonic wolves, and even the world and death. But remember especially on this day a picture of the Good Shepherd on the cross bleeding and dying for the life of the sheep, which you are one of them by faith. This is what the Good Shepherd is all about. Just like when he said near the

beginning of John's gospel, that the serpent was lifted upon the pole and the Israelites looked upon him for healing. But now, we his sheep, are healed to eternal life as we are gathered to the Good Sheperd upon the cross. This is the way into the eternal fold. Through the laying down of his life, the eternal fold's gate is open for all those who believe in the Good Shepherd.

Pastor Carpenter