

Good Shepherd Sunday

John 10:11-15

Sermon #686

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¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

In the name of the Good Shepherd, dear members of God's flock,

Here's a little three step exercise that could be fun and raise some eyebrows as well. I haven't tried it myself, but I'm pretty sure how it would work out...

Step number one: go to a bookstore, the bigger the better. Step number two: tell the clerk you are interested in the subject of leadership and that you would like to know if they have any books on that topic. The employee will no doubt take you to a section devoted exclusively to leadership and, depending upon the size of the bookstore, you will find scores of books on the subject.

Step number three. This should be the fun part. Thank the employee and then ask if they would now point you to the section devoted to following. Tell them you are most interested in books that will teach you how to blindly and without question follow others. Reason with them that if we have so many books on the subject of leading, it would seem we should have an equal amount on the subject of following. That's where the raised eyebrow part comes in.

Why? Because "leading" is considered a sign of strength and something worthy of being developed within us, whereas "following" is most often viewed as a sign of weakness and a character trait to be excised from our lives. For example, somewhere along the line just about all of us have been at either the speaking or receiving end of this one. Usually a poor decision is reviewed and then comes the question: "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, does that mean you would, too? Be a leader, not a follower."

All this may be true, but you know what? The message of our text is that there is indeed a time

WHEN FOLLOWING IS BEST

In fact, for us as Christians, *following* is the only way to go because

1. Christ is our Leader
2. Christ is our Good Shepherd

The character of Christ's leadership and the ramifications of Jesus as our Good Shepherd are intertwined throughout our text. So let's simply work our way through these verses and make our observations and applications along the way.

¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This statement of Jesus is extremely revealing on a number of different fronts...

The first thing to be noted is that this is one of seven great "I AM" statements made by Jesus in the Gospel of John. And every time Jesus talks like this He is making a powerful claim. The specific claim He is making is that He is nothing less than divine; that He is God. "I AM" is a declaration of divinity.

Our ears might not pick it up right away but the crowd originally hearing these words certainly would. They would instinctively know that with these words Jesus was referring to the Old Testament Book of Exodus. There, in chapter three, God declared to Moses at the burning bush that His name was "*I AM THAT I AM.*" So when Jesus leads off by saying "*I AM,*" everybody knew exactly what He was saying...

So what does this mean to us? At the risk of stating the obvious, it means we're in very good shape. Think about this: Our Leader is Christ, and Christ is God.

The world has seen many leaders come and go, but there is only one God. And that one true triune God, revealed to us in a way that we can understand in the person of Jesus Christ, is in the lead of our lives. And when none other than God Himself is in the lead, following is best. As well as comforting, stress-relieving, and anxiety-reducing.

Let's move on to how our Leader describes Himself. He says ¹¹ **I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.** Literally Jesus says, "I am the shepherd, the good one" which could also be translated "the excellent one" or "the beautiful one." The depth of his excellence and inward beauty is found in His willingness to die for the sheep. And let us note well that this act of laying down His life for the sheep is done voluntarily. No one takes His life from Him. He gives it up "for the sheep."

The little word translated "for" is very significant. In Greek this little word signifies substitution and could easily be rendered as "*in behalf of*" or "*instead of*." What Jesus is clearly conveying is that which would take place on Good Friday when He *did* lay down His life "*in behalf of*" or "*instead of*" His sheep, us. As the Lenten hymn puts it:

What punishment so strange is suffered yonder!
The shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander.

Or as we read in the prophet Isaiah: **"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."** Indeed, there is another sermon in that little word "for." It is the message of the Gospel.

This willingness to lay down His life for the sheep is the ultimate example of dedication. We will often speak of people being dedicated to this or that cause, but here is a thought that will absolutely take our breath away as we ponder it deeply: we were and we continue to be Christ's cause. He was and is completely dedicated to us, His sheep...

There is but one single purpose for which Christ visited this planet. There is but one reason why He lived out 33 years on earth and but one reason

why He died. And that is so that, as mentioned in the verse immediately preceding our text, we, His sheep, **“may have life and have it abundantly.”** – meaning a purposeful life here on earth which will eventually continue in an even fuller state in heaven forever.

If making things better and creating a brighter future is part of leadership, it is quite a Leader we have in Christ, our Good Shepherd. So in faith we follow on... through life and into eternity.

Our text continues with the depth of Jesus’ love for His sheep in comparison to the lack of dedication displayed by the hired hand. **¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.**

Who are the “hired hands” Jesus is referring to? He originally delivered these words to a crowd in which the Pharisees, who were very zealous but also very opposed to Christ, were present. They were the religious leaders and spiritual shepherds of the day. They were also quite frequently on the receiving end of some very scathing words from Jesus because of the wrong direction they were leading God’s people – often for their own purposes.

In a more general way, “hired hands” refer to any leaders and false teachers who exploit the sheep but really care little for them. Such “hired hands” invest only in themselves and consider ministry a means to furthering their own needs or pursuits or desires or personal ambitions. It is a sad but undeniable truth that such false shepherds exist now as they did back then.

At any rate, Jesus tells us the “hired hands” run at the first sign of danger or hardship because they have only their own interests in mind. Nevertheless, they do provide us with some value, because they present a stark contrast to the faithfulness, devotion, commitment and selflessness of our Leader, the Good Shepherd – whose loving relationship to His sheep is now reiterated and further described...

¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. Jesus declaration that He knows His sheep is of particular comfort to us. Think now of the shepherd-sheep interaction.

A good shepherd will be completely familiar with his flock. In fact, he will have an intimate knowledge of those under his care. He is able to account for each member of his flock and knows the nature and requirements of each one.

As members of Christ's flock, then, we are assured that He knows us intimately. As Isaiah tells us in chapter 43, He has summoned us by name and we are His. Again, think about what this means. This means we are loved, deeply and tenderly.

An illustration. Two weeks from today is Mother's Day. Of all the expressions and manifestations of love that we experience, the love of a mother for her child or a child for his or her mother is perhaps the most endearing and genuine. Whenever poets and wordsmiths want to convey the definitive image of tenderness and the purest form of love, they invoke mother-love.

But there is a greater love that exists. It is the love Christ has for each of His sheep. That's us. As we are told in Psalm 100: **"we are his people, the sheep of His pasture."**

Sometimes, to our great emotional peril, we forget this. We might reason that with all the billions of people on earth that He has to care for, we may be forgotten or get short-shrift. Related to this, I've heard people say they don't want to bother God with their prayers because they're sure He has more important things to be thinking about. In our weak and lonely moments we may feel that our existence is really rather unimportant, and that we are nothing more than a number destined to live and die in relative obscurity.

At other times we may question whether we are even worthy of being loved. We know ourselves and our past and what's really going inside as opposed to the façade we often present to the world. And we wonder if God is capable of loving "a wretch like me."

On top of that, we live in a fast-paced world which is very competitive and cliquish and sometimes we feel we are of little value in the big picture of life. As compared to the rich and the famous, the movers and shakers, we find ourselves feeling rather understated. Or even worse, totally insignificant.

Well, those may be our thoughts, but they aren't the thoughts of our Good Shepherd. What He says is this: "I know my sheep and I love my sheep. And I have the nail-prints to prove it."

So we follow Him, willingly and gladly, because we know He has our best in mind. Will there be some rough terrain during this journey we call life? Yes. That rough terrain may come in the form of trouble or sadness or sickness or loss or any of a number of other issues we would not have chosen for ourselves.

But nonetheless we can and do follow on with boldness and assurance. Because we know who is in the lead. And we know where He is leading us. The final verse of the Good Shepherd Psalm speaks of the confidence of every blood-bought lamb of God: **"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."**

We began this sermon by talking about the importance often attached to leadership and the negativity often attached to merely following. But the message of our text is that there is a time when following is best. That would be when we have a leader like Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.

And, thanks be to God, we do. He is ours and we are His. Amen.