

1 John 3: 16-24
John 10: 11-18
April 22, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

“I am the good shepherd,” announces Jesus. By now we have heard this statement and many others like it so often that it barely stirs a thought. Most of us have had no contact with actual shepherds. Perhaps we imagine a shepherd peacefully and lovingly watching over the flock in peaceful pastoral scenes with green pastures and still waters.

Jesus knew what all shepherds know. Being a shepherd is no fun. It is hard and thankless work. After all the shepherd is almost always looking after someone else’s sheep. He is watching them for someone else’s benefit. The little he or she is paid is a subsistence wage. The real money goes to the one who owns the sheep.

It is no wonder that in Jesus’ day shepherds had a bad reputation. They were generally people who were at the bottom of the social ladder. They were tough, unkempt and, like the sheep, often unruly. They had a reputation for hard drinking and rough language.

No wonder that shepherds had somewhat limited commitment to the sheep entrusted to their care. If one wandered away they would reasonably argue that it wouldn’t pay to leave the rest of the flock exposed to danger to go after one sheep who, through carelessness, has gotten lost. And what if humans armed with weapons came to steal the sheep? Would they risk their lives in trying to protect the sheep? They are after all, only hired hands.

Jesus sounds judgmental of the shepherds; but I don’t think he is being so. The reason we think Jesus *is* being judgmental is that he describes himself as the *good* shepherd. If Jesus is the *good* shepherd then the rest must be...?

The problem, as it is so often, lies not with what Jesus said, but how it has been translated. What Jesus *actually* said we cannot absolutely know since he spoke Aramaic. The Greek word which John uses is *kalos*. *Kalos* does not usually mean “good” in the sense of benevolent and caring. Its usual meaning is *beautiful, extraordinary*. In today’s popular parlance we might say that Jesus is the *awesome* shepherd!

Why is this important? It means that Jesus is transforming the idea of shepherd. We are no longer hearing about people with crooks keeping watch over the sheep. Nor are we talking about woolly four footed creatures on the rough Judean hillsides. We are talking about Jesus. We are talking about us.

Unlike the hired hands, Jesus *does* go after the one who is missing. Unlike the hired hands, Jesus develops a close relationship with the sheep. They follow him. They respond when they hear his voice. Most of all, unlike the hired hands Jesus puts the lives of the sheep above his own. He literally lays aside his attachment to his own mortal life in order to protect the flock. The Greek word here literally means to pick up and place elsewhere as one would a precious object. Jesus trusts that, through God’s raising him from the dead, Jesus will pick up that life again. That is why we, the sheep, trust him and seek to become attuned to the sound of his voice. It is why we come to worship and seek to follow him where he leads us.

Yet if the message stops here it risks becoming sentimental. We will always follow the Jesus who makes us to lie down in green pasture, leads us beside still waters and restores our souls. But what happens when our setting is like it was and is for most sheep in Palestine? When I was in Israel, the flocks I saw were scavenging on

rocky soil for tufts of grass growing out of gravelly dirt. No green pastures and no still waters—in most seasons there very little water at all. The landscape in the Judean hills is much more like wilderness.

Let us be brutally honest. How much of our loyalty to Jesus assumes that we will remain in green pastures? I do not mean only material comfort but also the emotional and psychological comfort of family and friends? How often has the death of a loved one been the occasion of a loss of faith-- or a protracted debilitating illness with chronic pain? What is left of our desire to follow Jesus when the critical supports for our lives are taken away?

I do not speak in judgment here. By the grace of God I have not personally experienced catastrophic tragedy. But I can imagine feeling utterly abandoned by the shepherd of Psalm 23, and even by the *good* shepherd. A big reason I might feel abandoned has less to do with being forgotten by Jesus; but instead by people like *me—people who claim to follow in the footsteps of the shepherd.*

One of the great spiritual dangers for clergy is that we are paid to be professional shepherds. Some of us do it well and some poorly. Most of us are in between. We are what Garrison Keillor might call “pretty good” shepherds. But in the end we are hired hands. We get overwhelmed. We lose perspective. We give great attention to some people and virtually ignore others. We may aspire to be *good shepherds* but we can never be the *kalos* shepherd—the beautiful, awesome shepherd.

What makes a pastor a pastor is that she or he knows this. A pastor becomes a spiritual leader when she or he not only knows his or her limited abilities but takes the next step. Spiritual leadership begins when the pastor turns to the beautiful and awesome shepherd and follows him whether in green pastures or wilderness. The best gift any pastor can offer is not his or her warm and caring heart, wonderful though that may be. No, the real gift is that they know that they are not the true shepherd *and they know who is! Jesus* is the beautiful and awesome shepherd who has laid aside his life for the sheep!

But here's the thing. The pastor is a hired hand. You are not hired hands. The pastor is paid to say these things and try to do them. You do them because it is part of your lives. And that is why pastors come and go but the community of faith carries on. It is by your seeking the beautiful shepherd that you become more and more like him. It is by your willingness to rely on him that people in the community who are lost or who think the church is obsolete discover that Jesus is alive.

Let this be a guiding mission statement at Hamilton Union: "We are not the beautiful shepherd—but *we know who is. It is Jesus! We ask you to help us in seeking him and being a sign of his presence. Amen.*