

HIRED HANDS AND GOOD SHEPHERDS

John 10:11-18

Precious Lord, hear our cries and lead us in your ways. Strengthen our hearts as we feed upon the word that comes from the one Good Shepherd. Keep our eyes so firmly fixed upon Jesus that earthly treasures, no matter how enticing, cannot divert our vision from your tending hand. Train our ears to distinguish your voice, concise and clear, amid the din of conflicting desires and mounting urges that compete for our attention. We submit ourselves to your shepherding love and mercy. Amen.

As a public service I am going to share with you some recent developments in church language. You know of intercessory prayer where we pray for the needs of others. There is also a form of prayer to avoid called “egocessory prayer”, a public prayer centered more on the pray-er and his eloquence and cleverness than on God.

You have heard of rope burn. For worshippers beware of “pewburn” which is a posterior malady of those who hustle from church immediately after the service ends as in “The Gleason’s were out of here so fast this morning they got ‘pewburn.’”

You know about bursitis. There is also “bulletinnitus:” The dazed, ear-ringing sensation you get when the announcements for the day drone on and on. Finally, there is the phrase “Catch 22, a kind of procedural gridlock.” There is now in church language “Catch 23:” An unwanted occurrence that turns out to be serendipitous because it makes those involved turn to the Lord as their Shepherd – Catch 23.

Perhaps we should take offense at Jesus calling us sheep. Sheep are notoriously stupid. Hold up a stick in front of the lead sheep in a procession of sheep and it will nimbly leap up and over it. Unfortunately the other sheep following will also obediently leap up to clear the stick even if it is removed after that first sheep jumped it. All the other sheep leap to avoid something that isn’t there because that is what sheep do.

And how many churches carry on traditions for reasons long since forgotten. And how many families continue to argue over whose fault it was when the pot roast burned Christmas Eve – 1987. So maybe we really are so often

just sheep. We just follow whatever happened before – regardless just because other sheep before us have done so.

A teacher asked a student, “If there were 12 sheep in a field and six jumped the fence, how many would there be left?” The student answered, “None.” “Yes there would be,” said the teacher. “No, ma’am, there wouldn’t,” he insisted. “You may know arithmetic, but you don’t know sheep.” Sheep follow after one another no matter where and that is why they need a leader they can trust.

In the Middle-Eastern culture of the first century the practice was for individual shepherds and their separate flocks to congregate in a common shelter for the night. The gathered flocks were penned together and their safety guarded by a gate-keeper. None except the shepherds, who were recognized as contributors to this common flock, would be allowed by the gate-keeper to pass into the fold.

The next day each shepherd would enter the guarded enclosure and call to his sheep. Shepherds named their individual sheep and whistled and called them by name as we might today call a dog. The sheep would respond to the voice of their own shepherd, come to him, and follow him out of the pen into their own grazing lands. Those who were unknown to the gate-keeper and whose voices were unrecognized by the sheep were likely thieves.

The Good Shepherd calls us by name. I remember hearing a story of a church that set a goal of having a thousand members. The day came to receive new members that would achieve this goal. When it came time to introduce a new group of members the pastor turned to one woman and said, “And this is the one thousandth member.” He never bothered to mention her name. She never returned to that church. She wanted to be known by her name, not as number 1000. That is one reason it is so important to wear a name tag, because the Shepherd calls us by name.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He knows his own and his own know him. A shepherd was herding his flocks through a pasture when a brand new Cadillac Escalade drove toward him out of a dust cloud. The driver, a young man in an expensive suit leaned out of the window and asked: “If I can tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?” The shepherd looked at the man, then at his large flock and answered, “Sure!”

The young man parked the car, whipped out his lap top computer, surfed a NASA page where he called up a GPS navigation system, scanned the area and opened a database and some 60 spreadsheets with complex formulas. Finally, he printed a 150-page report on a miniature printer, turned to the shepherd and said: “You have exactly 1586 sheep!” “That’s correct. As agreed, you can take one of the sheep,” said the shepherd. He watched the young man make a selection and bundle it into his Escalade.

Before this man pulled away the shepherd asked: “If I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me my sheep back?” “Okay, why not?” answered the young man. “You are a consultant” says the shepherd. “That’s correct,” he said. “How did you guess?” “Easy,” answered the shepherd. “You turn up here without being asked. You want to be paid for information I already have. And you don’t know anything about my business because you just took my dog.”

The Good Shepherd cares for the sheep in ways a hired hand does not. Certainly Jesus was not casting a critical eye on those who work for a living. There is nothing wrong with hirelings. We hire people to service our cars and repair our roofs and dry clean our clothes. It is just that if we hire someone to mow our lawn they finish and leave and don’t look at it or give it a thought for weeks. We look out on it and walk on it daily. It affects the beauty and hospitality and value of our home. The lawn care person is not indifferent. They care for it because that is how they make a living. They just don’t have the same level of concern as the homeowner. The homeowner is not likely to be indifferent or abandon his yard or decide to mow someone else yard instead of his own.

What Jesus condemned are those who run when danger arises and run away leaving the sheep instead of facing threats. We have all had good friends whose friendship lasted only so long as it did not cost them too much. We all have family members who were around until they decided the ties of family were not worth the cost to them. Good shepherds and good family and good friends do not count the cost but remain faithful and loving without cost. We have that choice – to act like hired hands or good shepherds. But if you seek to follow Jesus there is only one choice.

“And I lay down my life for the sheep.” A woman told of riding in a tour bus through Israel. She was sitting in the front seat since she was leading a

group, and was about half asleep, having made the same trip many, many times. Suddenly, the bus lurched to a stop, waking her up. There in the middle of the street was a shepherd.

With a 48-passenger bus running straight at him, most people wouldn't be out there, but there the shepherd was. His sheep were crossing the road, not all at once, but in twos and threes and ones. The shepherd never shooed them, or hurried them, he just stood his ground until the last sheep was safely off the road. Then he followed them, and threaded his way through the flock until he was back up front again, leading the way.

Sheep desperately need a keeper because after centuries of domesticated herd life they have lost the instincts they once had to defend themselves. When a wolf, or a coyote, or a dog gets into the flock, a sheep is incapable of mounting any kind of defense. There are things we have great trouble defending ourselves from. We need to stay near the shepherd. It is the shepherd's job to take care of the wolf. The sheep's job is to stay near the shepherd, in the shadow of his protection.

In the first century shepherds protected the sheep from predators like wolves and lion and thieves. A good shepherd is like a good banker, one who is trying to lead you carefully through times of difficulty so you can dwell securely in your home. A good shepherd today is like a legislator seeking to protect people from predators who run financial scams and sell sub-prime mortgages that can't be repaid and double credit card interests on a whim.

The sheep is no match for the wolf. Unprotected there are predators who prey on human weaknesses such as gambling. Predatory gambling preys on the human weakness of the lure of wealth. Legalized gambling is the government equivalent of sub-prime lending. The wolves have learned that slot machines are the most addictive form of gambling where people play longer, faster and more intensively. The wolves also know that a casino doubles the increased risk of residents living within 10 miles of the casino becoming problem gamblers.

But still many want to balance the state budget by allowing casinos even when it ultimately costs us much more to care for those afflicted by gambling. Wolves prey on human weakness. And there are all the predatory ads from beer to beauty products promising false hope just to take our money. The voices of shepherds seek to protect people in their

weakness are easily drowned out by choruses of lobbyists if we stray from him. Stay near the Shepherd and listen for his voice.

As those who follow him, as those we seek to be a shepherd of others in the way that Jesus is a shepherd to us, is not something for the faint hearted. Shepherds get injured. Sometimes shepherds get killed. They can be very lonely, and they are unlikely to get much for their efforts. You work with stupid and smelly animals. But for those who follow The Good Shepherd, it is a work of love. The Good Shepherd would not lay down his life for his sheep if he thought that with his death the sheep would be left helpless and alone. It is in laying down life that he gets it back again. It is in giving our life to the Good Shepherd that we get it back again.

Jesus added even more to this lesson when he said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” In the first century a sheep fold was a separated, walled enclosure in which shepherds gathered their flocks for safekeeping during the night. A fold had definite boundaries and size limitations. A flock, on the other hand, could refer to any number of sheep. Flocks were scattered and distributed over wide areas and different terrain.

By distinguishing between the one small fold that now exists and the one great flock that the Good Shepherd seeks to gather together with his voice, Jesus tell us he seeks all sorts and conditions of people to be his own. Christ reached out to the other sheep, the ones standing on the edge, those without a shepherd to protect them, those who have wandered away, all who need the Shepherd’s care. Jesus says that he will bring these other sheep also, not in the same fold but still part of one flock having one shepherd.

We are challenged to choose which voice we should listen to and which ones we will not. Many are still recovering from following the voice of a financial advisor, that dear trusted friend who guided people in the use of their money until the money was gone and they were gone. There is the encouraging voice many an athlete has heard from a coach until the athlete is injured and they find themselves suddenly disposable. How many companies give good wages and promise lifetime support – until it gets too expensive, and their care dwindles away.

There is one voice we know that will lead us to life, only one shepherd we can trust with certainty. If you accept Jesus as The Good Shepherd, if you believe him when he said that we are all sheep of his fold then we are not supposed to be wandering off on our own or listen to other voices. If you believe that Jesus is your Shepherd then we shall not want. He makes us lie down in green pastures;

He leads us beside still waters; he restores our soul. He leads us in right paths for his name's sake. Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we should fear no evil for he is with us to protect and comfort us. He prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies; he anoints us with blessing; our cup overflows. His goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life, and we will dwell in the house of the LORD our whole life long.

O God, you are the light of the world, the desire of all nations and the shepherd of our souls: let your light shine in the darkness, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God. By the lifting up of your Cross, gather the peoples to your obedience; let your sheep hear your voice, and be brought home to your fold, so that there may be one flock, one shepherd, one holy kingdom of righteousness and peace, one God and Father of all, above all, and in all, and through all. Amen. (W. E. Orchard, 1877-1955, Presbyterian minister, then Catholic priest and liturgist)

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The Federated Church of Hyannis

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