

“Hired Hands and Shepherds”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Psalm 23; I John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Richard E. Otty
April 26, 2015

Our lessons mesh this morning. We read together the shepherd psalm, and in our Gospel Jesus will tell his disciples he is the good shepherd, who willingly lays down his life, echoing what we just heard in I John 3.

In John 10, Jesus uses two “I am” statements to speak of himself. In the verses preceding our lesson, he says, “I am the gate.” The gate of a sheepfold both opens out to grassy pastures during the day and closes behind for at night. Jesus, as the gate is the “way to life.”

In our lesson, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” He knew the 23rd Psalm, as well as Ezekiel 34, both of which describe the good shepherd as one who seeks out and rescues the sheep, leads the flock to safety, and provides green pastures and still waters.

One note on the shepherd image I encourage you to keep in mind. There is one shepherd. There is no suggestion made for us to be shepherds. That might have us rethinking what we call the Shepherding Team, as well as our reference to pastors as shepherds of their flock. There is one shepherd.

We remain sheep. God is the shepherd for both the psalmist and the reader of the psalm. Jesus is the good shepherd for his flock and does not suggest we are to be shepherds for one another. That said, we do glean from these lessons a communal nature of being sheep of Jesus’ fold, and can hear our responsibilities for our life together.

The “I” throughout the lesson is Jesus. Let us hear our Gospel lesson in John 10:11-18:

¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I 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. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

I think Jesus gives the hired hand a bad rap. Yes, I am aware he is using Ezekiel's image of a false shepherd as a contrast with the good shepherd, but there are times I long to be a hired hand, lying in green pastures, resting by still waters, and enjoying soul-restoring activities. I recall the college summer I spent mowing lawns at a Y conference center in upstate New York. I would go to work, mow the lawns with noisy machines such that I could not be easily interrupted, and then enjoyed the rest of the day, swimming in the lake, playing softball, reading, napping, eating, drinking. I did not think about the lawns until the next day of work. Yes, to be a hired hand – just do one's job and head home at the end of the day to enjoy those lazy, hazy, crazy days of the summer.

I think of hired hands as those whose work is on a list of "least stressful" jobs. In one such list, medical records technician was listed first, and it was noted manila folders don't talk back to you as might co-workers in adjoining cubicles. Decades ago, I recall such lists included bus drivers, who could go to work, do their job, then go home and forget about it. These days, not knowing how what one might encounter when dealing with the public, such jobs no longer make the "least stressful" lists.

One might find Jesus' portrayal of a hired hand attitude if you enter a store and ask where to find an item. It is generally expected the owner-shepherd of a business will go an extra mile to help; however, a hired hand might act as if you have interrupted their texting, and simply point and say, "I think it's over there." We may avoid big box stores if we think we will be sheep wandering on our own; however, in such settings we notice even more the employee whose better nature makes an extra effort to help when she or he has neither a vested interest, an ownership share, nor a stated responsibility to do so.

Jesus is contrasting himself to those who have been made leaders, but who, when things become inconvenient or dangerous, vacate their responsibility to care for the flock. It is likely an indictment of those who, when Roman religious oppression became severe, hesitated to advocate for their people, especially the most vulnerable and least powerful of their flock. Instead, they cozy up to the empire to protect their lives and jobs. Using Jesus' imagery, these supposed shepherds acted like hired hands, doing their work until the wolf was seen in the field, and chose to abandon the sheep and save themselves.

The good shepherd chooses to care for the sheep even at risk to self, even if it means laying down one's life for the flock. John wants his readers to make the connection with Jesus' crucifixion, and the choice Jesus made: *No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.*

There are many variations of a story-parable of a scorpion, and its innate nature to sting. Perhaps you have heard it told as a Native American teaching, or as wisdom from Zen Buddhism. The late Jesuit priest and writer Henri Nouwen told the story-parable this way:

One morning, after he had finished his meditation by a tree, an old man opened his eyes and saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the water. As the scorpion was washed closer to the tree, the old man quickly stretched himself out on one of the long roots that branched out into the river and reached out to rescue the drowning creature. As soon as he touched it, the scorpion stung him. Instinctively the man withdrew his hand. A minute later, after he had regained his balance, he stretched himself out again on the roots to save the scorpion. This time the scorpion stung him so badly with its poisonous tail that his hand became swollen and bloody and his face contorted with pain.

At that moment, a passerby saw the old man stretched out on the roots struggling with the scorpion and shouted: "Hey, stupid old man, what's wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life for the sake of an ugly, evil creature. Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?"

The old man turned his head. Looking into the stranger's eyes he said calmly, "My friend, just because it is the scorpion's nature to sting, that does not change my nature to save."

While connecting the "nature to save" to Jesus as the good shepherd, I also ponder national conversations we have had about torture. While there have been debates about what is and what is not torture, leaders like John McCain call us back to our better nature as a nation, our founding values and ethics that to paraphrase the parable, reveals, "just because it is the scorpion's nature to sting, that does not change our nation's nature not to torture."

These days, fears of ISIS, and terrorism may have us grouping all Muslims together as a threat to Christianity. Coupled with the reported tremendous growth of Islam as a faith, with its prayer, dietary and tithing disciplines far exceeding what most Christians practice, we may feel the need to sound a caution, but in so doing we engender fear and foster stereotypes that group all Muslims together. At such times, it would be wise for us to find someone who is Muslim and talk with her or him. If we do not, I think we become like the hired hand, forgetting our commitment to follow the good shepherd, and abandoning his nature to reach out to include and engage; instead, we retreat to protect self.

In Psalm 23, it is the nature of the shepherd to lead, restore, comfort, prepare, and save. Jesus would have known, read and recited this psalm, trusting in God as his own shepherd. As we view Jesus, we sense it is his nature, and his choice and responsibility, to be the good shepherd, who seeks and rescues, gathers and feeds, strengthens and protects the sheep.

Jesus' firm placement of himself as the good shepherd both frees and challenges individual sheep to become a flock, who not only share a common shepherd, but assume the responsibility to care for one another.

Our I John 3 lesson sets it forth quite clearly: *We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*

For me, the challenge of this lesson is not whether we are going to be good shepherds or hired hands, but whether we are going to be a faithful fold of sheep, following the teachings of Jesus the good shepherd. We are not to be shepherds to one another, but a flock of mutual care and love. I also think an unstated challenge is for us to recognize our isolation, the ways we stake out pastures of homogeneity, from which we cannot see the brother or sister in need, and certainly do not know their names.

We begin to live out our life with the good shepherd within our small flock, within the congregation where we know each other, share common beliefs, and pray and care for one another's needs. Yet, there is a lingering challenge in Jesus' words, for 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.*

Jesus was speaking of the Gentiles – non-Jews, foreigners – who did not share a common language, culture or tradition with the early believers. Today, these words challenge any desire or attempt to define the sheep who know the good shepherd's voice, based on our own beliefs or biases, politics or theology, nationality or faith. This is equally challenging for progressive and conservative Christians who might find it easy to dismiss the other. We are to remember Jesus, the good shepherd, has sheep in other folds who may not be or think like us.

The understanding of having a shepherd we can trust with our lives is freeing. It is not an idyllic belief we are freed from the dangers and crises and heartbreaks of life, but a confidence the shepherd has gathered us in flocks. Yet, even as sheep, we have responsibilities, and as one has written, "the consistent test of genuine Christianity is ...whether our feet and our tongues are in alignment." [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008, p. 443]

When we, the sheep, take to heart the leading and teaching of Jesus, the good shepherd, there may come a time when someone will say to us, *"Hey, stupid..., what's wrong with you? Why are you showing such care and love when you don't have to, and when it could even hurt you?"*

With confidence, may we simply say, *"My friend, just because it may be in their nature to hate, it is in my nature to show the care and love of the shepherd I follow."*