

## John 10:11-18

Easter 4; April 26, 2015

If you could be an animal, what would it be? A tiger? A bear? A cheetah? A dolphin? An eagle? If I had to guess, I would think that many of us would not choose to be sheep. Why not? Well, think about it. Sheep are helpless before their enemies. They don't have sharp teeth or claws. They can't run fast. They don't make sharp turns. They're not stealthy. They don't know how to hide. Their fur doesn't blend with their surroundings. They can't even make a fierce or threatening sound! Sheep aren't particularly good at finding water and pasture for food. They tend to wander from the rest of the flock where at least there is some safety in numbers. If a sheep stumbles and rolls on his back, he can't ever turn himself over. They are defenseless animals that must be taken care of and protected. So who wants to be called a sheep?!

Yet, perhaps, "sheep" is a good description as to who we truly are. It's not always a pretty picture. We aren't strong enough or ferocious enough to fight off our spiritual enemies. We can't run fast enough to get away from them. We can't hide from them. We can't even talk big to scare our spiritual enemies. Like sheep we are helpless before them. We also have this tendency to wander from God, his truth and his church. We don't understand where to find life-giving water and nourishment. Therefore Jesus says that we, like sheep, are defenseless, and open to attack. If we look into our sinful hearts, we may see what Jesus describes: **"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."** (Mt. 15:19) We truly need a GOOD Shepherd. What comfort these words of Jesus are for us: **"I am the Good Shepherd, I know my sheep and they know me."**

When we hear the word, **"good,"** we will often think in terms of things being *"ok."* For us the term *"best"* or *"greatest"* is better than **"good."** Yet, in addition to just the general idea of being good, the word that Jesus uses can be used to describe something as *"precious"* or *"beautiful."* With that meaning in mind, Jesus was pointing out that as far as the work of a shepherd was concerned, spiritually speaking, he was the model shepherd. In other words, there is no other shepherd that compares. He is THE GOOD shepherd.

This shepherd watches over us in every aspect of our lives. For the average person, our lives are around 70 years. During that time, the average person will breathe some 30 billion times. He will sleep for about 250,000 hours. Eat somewhere in the region of 76,000 meals. Use the restroom some 200,000. The statistics sound impressive, don't they? Actually, it's not. It's pretty routine for all of us. Yet, Jesus knows every routine hours and minutes in our lives. He knows his sheep and he cares for us.

He knows his sheep when they are in trouble. What do sheep do when they are in trouble? They bleat: *Bah...Bah...Bah.* When the Shepherd hears their call, he comes running to help them and to protect them. He cares for them so much that he is willing to lay down his own life for the sheep. It's one thing to lay down one's life for another person. It's another thing to lay down your life for an animal that is often worthless, wayward and wandering.

Jesus was a different kind of shepherd than perhaps some of the shepherds that watched the flocks of Palestine. He wanted everyone to know that they knew the difference. Some people watched their flocks because this was their job. They did their job and took their pay, and if there was any trouble they would be the first to leave the flocks. But not Jesus. He loves the flock so much that he says: **"I lay down my life for the sheep."** If you want to see how much the Good Shepherd loves you, look at the cross.

The story is told that two brothers decided to play in some large sand piles by a river. The sand would be dredged from the bottom of the river. The dredges would dump the sand in large piles by the river. As the piles of sand would dry in the sun, the tops of the piles would develop a rigid crust on the piles. But sometimes, that crust would conceal internal voids that would be formed by the escaping water. If someone would walk across one of those areas and they would fall into one of those voids, the sand would begin to collapse like a giant sinkhole. That was exactly what happened to these two boys.

When the boys did not return home at dinnertime, family and neighbors organized a search. When they found the younger brother only his head and shoulders protruded from the mound. He was unconscious from the pressure of sand

on his body. The searchers began digging frantically. When they had cleared the sand to his waist, he became consciousness. "Where is your brother?" the rescuers shouted. "I'm standing on his shoulders," replied the child. With the sacrifice of his own life the older brother lifted the younger to safety.

That is what our Good Shepherd has done for us, his sheep. He sacrificed His life so that we could live. He wants all to be saved. He wants all to trust in Him for life. Remember the old picture of Uncle Sam pointing his finger at you saying the words: "*I want you!*" Jesus says the same to each of you: "*I want you. I want you. I want you.*" Once sheep are part of his flock, he wants more. **"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also."** Through his word and sacraments he does just that.

If you could be any kind of animal, what would you be? Perhaps, I would be a monkey.... Why? Because there are times that it is hard for me to sit still, and because monkeys seem to have fun swinging from tree to tree. What would you be? May we all give thanks that we are sheep. We are sheep that follow our Good Shepherd who cares for us and who has died for us. May the Lord keep all of us as part of his flock. May the Lord use each of us to bring more sheep into our Lord's flock. Amen.