

Pastor Frank Espegren

Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday – April 28, 2021

John 10:11-18 - “Not of this Fold”

Grace and peace to you this day from God our loving Parent, and from the One who shepherds, knows and loves us in life, Jesus Christ our Savior & Lord. Amen. Good Shepherd Sunday. It's an Easter Season Gospel standard (and a break in our Easter season from the Resurrection accounts of the latter chapters of the Gospels). Can I just say it, the Good Shepherd is a theme we struggle to embrace in our 21st Century culture & sensibility?

I used to think this symbolic understanding of Jesus as Good Shepherd was difficult because as our culture and society has become less agrarian & more technological (think electric fence over shepherd's crook), we have difficulty connecting with the lives of sheep or shepherd. But, I think it's gone way beyond that. It's gotten so that the last thing any one of us wants to think of ourselves is as a passive, compliant sheep, regardless of who the shepherd is. We've actually developed modern slang for this. People who we perceive to behave like sheep

derogatorily are referred to as “sheeple.” Perhaps you’ve heard the term. In case your confused about it at all, t is never intended as a compliment.

But in the Gospel of John, it lays it right out there. We are to be sheep to Jesus’ Good Shepherd. We are to follow him. Which raises some questions. Are we to follow blindly, without question, in dereliction of our agency, against societal expectation and approval? Have you heard anyone praising a human being who acts like a sheep recently? Because that’s what I’m selling in this sermon today.

And here’s why you should buy it. It’s not the shepherding or following part that really is the hook, although following Jesus is in fact important (albeit sometimes immensely frustrating, and even contrary every so often to our common human instincts). Yes, there is following. It’s right there in the Gospel. But there’s also the knowing, and being known too. “I am the Good Shepherd,” Jesus says, “I know my own and my own know me.”

And we should celebrate that because one of the things that marks a human life, at least a good one, well lived, is to have known and been known; to have seen and been seen. To know and be known is perhaps the deepest desire of our hearts. On our deathbeds, there is really nothing more important than being able to recount that. That is why I highly recommend the following because that's how the knowing happens too.

It's important to note that this key segment of the Gospel of John about Jesus as the Good Shepherd is not free-standing. Biblically, it does not come to us as an unattached monologue by Jesus, out of nowhere. Jesus' teaching that he is the Good Shepherd in the 10th chapter of John springs from what has come before it in the 9th chapter.

There, a man blind since birth is healed (interesting since we often think following is only done by those who cannot see). Jesus is working this in the exact opposite vein. This particular healing doesn't even come from a solicitation to help. The man who Jesus heals in the story is presented first in the 9th Chapter of John has only one characteristic – he is simply and

solely blind. That's all the disciples note as they pass him by in conversation. The blind man becomes for Jesus' followers, and then the Pharisees (but take careful note, not for Jesus), what we often make of people that we do not understand, people who are different from us. Our protective instinct is to make such people mere matters of summary and conjecture, subject to our tendencies to categorize and scapegoat and lord over and, perhaps worst of all, even, forget. We become, in essence, blind to them. We do this all the time – it being so core to our sinful beings. The subject, you see, is sin. “Who sinned, this one or his parents?” Jesus' followers are the blind sinners, reducing the man to caricature, reducing ailment to God's judgment.

But instead of taking the usual bait, Jesus immediately settles on a course of healing – no blame attached. And after the disciples' conjecture, and then after the Pharisees tie themselves in knots trying to maintain control of the situation in the face of Jesus' miracle (there's that “control” word again, the opposite of faith). Instead of reveling in the experience of

miraculous healing and giving glory to God for what transpired right before their eyes, the Pharisees choose to remain blind. But to the man who Jesus heals, even more is revealed. “See,” he says, I am before you – and it is with new eyes that the formerly blind man can see.

To this context, and specifically to the disbelieving, unknowing, off-the-trail Pharisees, Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. A knowing that was willing to stop and touch and return and give thanks. Like the Pharisees, we definitely do have another option – it is totally within our discretion to stop up of our ears and the cover our eyes. Examine your conscience, and I think you will see, we do it all the time.

Which is such a shame, because Jesus is not only a shepherd who guides and walks with us – which would be amazing enough. But this shepherd even dies for the sheep – not like the hired hand, who run away. This is a shepherd who both knows us and also knows what He must do. This shepherd is there, even when pushed to the edge, yet keeps eyes on and

ears open. This shepherd walks with those whose daily journey takes them through the valley of the shadow of death simply because of who they are, where they come from, what color their skin is, the travails and challenges unjustifiably assigned to some in our society, instead of the beneficial extra portion others like me receive by no merit of our own, leaving the former with something far less.

Which leads me in conclusion to the two other lessons in today's worship. Which I believe answer well what derives from true knowing and true following. The Acts lesson finds Peter, fresh off doing his own miraculous healing, in Jesus' name. Since no good deed goes unpunished (as the saying goes), the result of this is that Peter is dragged in disgrace before the same temple authorities who participated in Jesus' killing: Annas and Caiaphas and others. The last time Peter was anywhere near the likes of these he ended up denying Jesus three times and running away.

"I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus says, "I know my own and my own know me." Now, through the power of the Holy Spirit,

Peter has been given another opportunity to know who he is, having been fully known by the One he formerly failed. I guess some might see it as Peter blindly following Jesus all the way to the gallows (which at first read, seems likely). But instead, Peter has courage to stand up and own his actions, own his belief, own his following. It doesn't win him approval, but it sure changed the world, one person at a time, and for the better. Because Jesus lives, Peter does too, and so do we.

This is what following Jesus means in our lives, what it leads to; the awakening of our hearts; to discover more and more about His marvelous love. As the writer of 1st John sums it up quite well: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Because that's what love looks like following Jesus - a million acts of knowing because we are known, loving because we are loved, healing because we are healed, acting because we have experienced truth, and shepherding because the Good Shepherd even lays down his life for us. I guess some might read that as blind following, that we are merely sheeple. But I'd call it something different - the opposite of blindness

actually - the gift of knowing and being known. That's what being Easter people is all about!! Amen.