

Easter 4, April 25, 2021, John 10:11-18

In the eight verses of this morning's gospel reading, Jesus uses the pronoun "I" 12 times, in addition to a couple instances of "me", "my", and "mine". Jesus obviously did not have the same preaching instruction I got at Gettysburg Seminary. If I had referred to myself over a dozen times in just two paragraphs, I would have been told to rewrite the sermon with less emphasis on myself.

But Jesus was not in seminary, he was not in a preaching class. Jesus was in the midst of conflict and controversy and he wanted to differentiate himself from those whom he was criticizing. He also wanted to assure his followers of the difference between him and them, a difference of life and death importance.

Shortly before this episode Jesus had gotten the religious authorities so riled up that they wanted to stone him to death, but he escaped. He then healed a man born blind, igniting a whole new controversy that ended with Jesus bluntly calling the Pharisees sinners.

Jesus uses the imagery of the Good Shepherd to differentiate himself from those Pharisees and other religious leaders, past and present. After more controversy over whether or not Jesus was the Messiah, the authorities again wanted to stone Jesus to death, this time for blasphemy.

Jesus describes himself as the "Good Shepherd" presumably in contrast to some "Bad Shepherds." So, what are the characteristics of a Good Shepherd, and how do they differ from the attributes of a Bad Shepherd?

Mark and Luke both tell the story of a rich man asking Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers, "Why do you call me good, no one is good but God alone." So now, in calling himself the "Good" Shepherd, Jesus is making a veiled reference to himself as God! No wonder the Pharisees accused him of blasphemy!

Jesus says the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Earlier in John's gospel Jesus had made a mysterious reference to his "going away", but the cross was still a long way off. Here, as elsewhere, Jesus holds up his willingness to give up his life for our sake as the ultimate measure of his love.

The Good Shepherd has a rich investment in his sheep, the investment of love. The Good Shepherd cares for and about the sheep for the SHEEP'S sake, not his own. It is not what is in it for him, but for the good of the sheep that he is willing to lay down his life.

On the contrary, the hired hand, the "not good" shepherd is concerned only for his own welfare. When the wolf comes the hired hand will sacrifice the sheep for his own sake. There is no investment, no relationship, no love. The not good shepherd only sees an opportunity for his own gain.

To be clear, the hired hands Jesus is talking about include the religious leaders of his day. They were more concerned with their own authority, power, and wealth than they were about the salvation of their flock. But going back to the days of the Old Testament, the prophets of God warned the kings of Israel, the "shepherds" of God's people about being greedy, power hungry, abusers of God's flock.

The Good Shepherd is willing to die for the sheep, but he will not be a victim. He makes that known when he says, "No one takes it from me, I lay it down of my own accord. Eventually, Jesus will die, but he will do it on God's terms and according to God's plan.

And when Jesus does lay down his life, it will not be the end of the story. He will take it up again! Once again Jesus assures us that no power on earth, or anywhere else, can overcome the power of God to raise Jesus, and all who believe in him, to eternal life.

Jesus makes a somewhat mysterious statement in this passage about having 'other sheep that do not belong to this fold.'" Great minds have never been able to reach a consensus on who these other sheep are, but one thing is clear; whoever they are, Jesus is the one who will bring them into the fold, and it is not up to us to judge whether they belong or not.

The Good Shepherd is calling us into his loving care. He has laid down his life and taken it up again to open the way for us to enter. As we answer his call, let us always give thanks that Christ is risen, alleluia! Amen.