

John 10:11-18

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter is often called Good Shepherd Sunday. We always read the 23rd Psalm and we hear one of the Good Shepherd readings from John's Gospel.

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the most cherished images in the church. Jesus as the Good Shepherd has been painted, and sculpted, and depicted in stained glass countless ways. How many of us have memorized the 23rd Psalm? How many have memorized any other psalm? The image captivates us like nothing else. The image of Jesus as our Shepherd is very familiar.

The problem is that it is so familiar that things have flip-flopped and the image of Jesus now informs the images we hold of shepherds. There's a better than average chance that the Good Shepherd is the only shepherd that we know or think about. Shepherds aren't very common any more and today's shepherds don't have a lot in common with the shepherds of Jesus' day. In Jesus' day, for instance, shepherds were scorned as menial laborers. It was simple work, often done by boys. When adults continued to tend sheep, in many ways they were considered lower class than women or children, because women and children couldn't help what they were. Shepherds had either failed at anything else they tried or had no ambition to be anything else.

We don't have a good equivalent today, but shepherds were the fast food workers, the attendants at gas stations, migrant farm workers, housekeeping at Motel 6. Society didn't value them because while it was necessary, shepherding was a nasty job that no one wanted to do.

Until recently I was a shepherd, and for me it wasn't too bad. Sheep are horrible on the environment, tend to graze grass very low, and there were lots of them, so shepherds had to walk long distances to find those green pastures to lie down in. Today we have fences, and we just rotated pastures. There were no vaccinations or antibiotics in ancient Palestine and sheep would have frequently gotten sick (which is usually pretty gross) and needed tending. Any ewe that was close to giving birth had to be watched carefully. Predators, both 4 legged and 2 legged, were a real threat. Shepherds often had to sleep with their sheep, either in the field or in their enclosures. I had a dog to do that. I've learned a lot about shepherding. Sheep are better than some animals, and please forgive the vulgarity, but there is a lot of poop involved in shepherding. Shepherds sleeping with their flocks and bathing only once in a while would not have smelled very good.

All in all, Jesus was not painting a very pretty image of himself. When he claimed the role of our Good Shepherd he did not have beautiful stained glass windows in mind. Jesus was claiming a place among the lowly, those looked down upon, apart from polite society. He was willing to leave comfort behind and go into the wild places, the dangerous places, the dirty stinky places and to lie down there and keep watch over his flock through the night. He was willing to leave the 99, and go find the one that was lost, and put it over his shoulders, only to have it do unspeakable things down his back.

And then he was willing to lay down his life for them.

Why? Why leave his Father's side for a poopy pasture in Palestine? Why care so much for something so lowly?

Well, we've heard about shepherds, let me tell you about sheep. Sheep are used as an image of dull, stupid uniformity, "Look at them all following along blindly, like a bunch of sheep. "

Our two wethers, we called them the twins, Thing One and Thing Two, though we didn't always know which is which, except that Thing 2 was somehow always dirtier even though they went everywhere together and they panicked if they got separated by more than 30 feet. They were both deeply curious, and they would come watch whatever we were working on. They won't get too far apart, but still, like any twins, they would wrangle and butt one another. They like to have fun. Sometimes the dog chased them, sometimes they chased the dog. They would do almost anything for a handful of molasses feed, which is kind of like sheep crack.

Matje, one of our rams, was very different. He liked to loaf, he would move from sun to shade if he had to when it got hot. He had a funny habit of sitting back on his haunches like a dog. He liked the smell of grain or sweet feed, but he was very suspicious of anyone who offers it to him. The dog loved to torment him. She'd nip at him, and he'd butt her hard enough that she yelped. And in the evening when it got cool, the two of them would snuggle up together.

Our ewes, Emmie and Coco, were different still. Emmie was highly suspicious of everyone, especially of me, because shepherds sometimes have to do mean things, like trim hooves or give vaccinations, but she would still follow me into the barn at night. Coco was more laid back, she was our smallest sheep, and she mostly went placidly where she was needed, as long as it wasn't too far. Both Emmie and Coco always had grass sticking out of their mouths, because they never stopped eating.

Even the youngest lambs, from the first 15 minutes of their lives, each of them was different still. Some are black and some are white, some are curious or playful or suspicious or frightened, each one is different and each one is wonderful.

And that's why Jesus is the good shepherd. He knows his own and his own know him. He looks at us and he doesn't see dirty, smelly, stupid sheep. He sees Thing One and Thing Two, and Emmie, and Matje, and Coco, and Birch and Helen and Melissa and Paul and Andrew and George, and Breonna, and Daunte each one different and each one wonderful, each one named and he longs to gather us all to himself, lift us onto his shoulders, and you know the rest.

Today we're reminded too that he has sheep in another fold. We've been taught that Jesus was referring to the Gentiles, us, mission accomplished, but I think it's vitally important for us to hold on to that image. There is always someone else who is not here.

We are not the sheep and everyone else the goats, there is always another fold that our Shepherd longs to gather, and he knows them and calls them by name too.

Derek Chauvin is one. Sometimes I am, too. That's why he came and why he humbled himself. There will be one flock under one Shepherd, the one who laid down his life for all of us, and who took it up again.

Alleluia.