

What Makes the Good Shepherd Good?

May 15, 2011 Easter 4A

John 10:1-10

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There was a time during high school and college when I was a hired hand. I worked on a farm with about 100 goats. It was my job, at least some of the time, to milk those goats. It was my chance to be a shepherd.

When it says in the gospel that the sheep know their shepherd's voice, the same is true of goats. The woman I worked for could step into the pen, call the goats by name, and they would come running. They would line up in orderly rows and wait patiently for her to milk them.

Contrast my experience. When I entered the pen, I didn't have to say a word before the goats began scattering in every direction. When I called them by name, they all took off and hid behind the shed.

One particular goat—a black goat with a touch of white around her ears—was named Twinkles. She was almost my undoing. I'd coax, "Here Twinkles. Come to me, Twinkles. I won't hurt you." But Twinkles didn't trust me for a second. One day I chased Twinkles around the pen for 15 minutes before I finally trapped her in the corner. I slowly reached out to grab her collar. Just then she bolted past me, climbed up on a ledge, and jumped over the fence. She strutted away with an indignant look on her face, as if to say, "How dare you!"

Believe me, at that moment, I felt like a hired hand and not like a shepherd. And, if truth be told, that's what I was. I really didn't care about those goats, and they knew it.

In our gospel for today, Jesus holds up the image of sheep and shepherds. It's an image his listeners can relate to. Shepherds are everywhere. Some of those shepherds are good at what they do. Others are more like me—they're just in it for the paycheck.

Why is Jesus talking about this? Not to give us a lesson in first-century farming practices, I'm guessing. No, he's talking about shepherds and sheep because his own identity is being called into question. In the previous chapter in John, Jesus heals a man who was born blind. It's creates a stir. People are asking: *Who is this man? Can we trust him? Is he really from God? Or is he some sort of charlatan?* As Jesus takes on their concerns, he describes the relationship between shepherds and sheep as one of trust. He assures his listeners that, unlike the hired hands who've come before him, he is a shepherd and he is good and he can be trusted.

So, is it true? What is it that makes the Good Shepherd good? For one thing, *the shepherd knows the sheep*. They've spent a lot of time together. He calls them by name. In Bible times, the sheep ended up at the same watering hole around dusk—eight or nine small flocks turned into a little convention of thirsty sheep. It wasn't a problem, though. When it was time to go, each shepherd issued his own distinctive call or whistle, and those sheep would get up and follow their shepherd home. At the heart of it, say the shepherd, "I know my own and my own know me."

A few years back, my family and I piled into our van to go to South Dakota for a family baptism. At first I was doing the driving. Friday afternoon traffic wasn't bad. We were making good time. I thought everything was going fine. But then the comments started.

You see, the van belonged to my wife, Brenda. She could be very protective of her vehicle. There were moments, in fact, when she came across kind of—well—snippy. So here I was at the wheel, doing my normal driving, seamlessly moving in and out of traffic, trying to make good time. And my wife was sitting in the passenger's seat, arms crossed, muttering things under her breath like: "Too fast around the corners, too much brake, too much lane changing, watch out for that pothole." Finally she blurted out, "You drive kind of whippy! This isn't a sports car, you know!"

Pretty soon it was Brenda's turn to drive. Mind you, I wasn't really looking to get even. Okay, that's a lie. But in my humble opinion, there were moments when *she* was applying too much brake, and *she* was darting in and out of traffic, and *she* was taking the corners a bit too quickly. Being the helpful person that I am, I felt the need to point that out: "Ah, dear, what was that you were saying about *my* driving?" Just then Brenda flashed me a look of complete exasperation and said: "Well, I know my van, and my van knows me." And we laughed.

What makes the Good Shepherd good? He knows us. We spend time together. We get used to hearing his voice and following his lead.

But it's more than that. The Good Shepherd is good because *he takes care of the sheep*. He knows what sheep need: green pastures, still waters, guiding, restoring, protecting. And note the care the Shepherd is offering leads not simply to life, but to *abundant* life.

Isn't that the kind of life we're looking for? The chance to not simply exist, but thrive; to not simply fill up space, but flourish? Aren't we looking for a sense of purpose and fulfillment? To be known and valued and loved? Here's the question: if that's the kind of life what we're looking for, are we finding it?

A few years back there was a PBS documentary series called *Frontline*. One particular segment was “The Persuaders.” It had to do with the changing nature of advertising in our culture. Advertisers—so the segment informed us—are not simply selling a product. They’re selling a way of life. And they’re connecting meaning and purpose to that life. The narrator went on to make a jarring claim: “Emotional branding seeks to fill the empty places that civic institutions like schools and churches used to fill.” *Ouch!*

That got my attention. It made me wonder: have we too often gone looking for life, even abundant life, in things like I-Phones and fine cars and exotic vacations and upscale homes? If the answer is *yes*, then that leads to a second question: have these things given us the meaning and purpose we’ve been looking for?

The Good Shepherd is good because he promises to take care of us. He promises to feed our deepest hungers. He promises to give us abundant life, a life that is far more satisfying than anything advertisers are offering.

What makes the Good Shepherd good? Not only does he know the sheep. Not only does he take care of them. The Good Shepherd is good because he’s willing to lay down his life for them. He might be up at midnight helping with a birth. He might forgo a day off because one of them is sick. He might have to chase away a pack of wild dogs who’ve been roaming the countryside. As I see it, the Good Shepherd will do just about anything for his little flock.

I was listening to a report on National Public Radio. It told of an effort in Chicago to improve the living conditions of a low-income housing project. The housing project was a place where drugs were peddled openly, where stabbings and shootings happened all too frequently, where children were sometimes left to fend for themselves. Then came truckloads of federal money. Washington was going to clean up the place and make the streets safe again.

Several months went, by, millions of dollars got spent, but there was little, if any, change. “Why not?” asked the reporter from NPR, “What went wrong?” It was concluded that, among other things, the hiring of part-time security guards at \$6 an hour wasn’t enough to insure anyone’s safety and well-being.

Big surprise: security guards weren’t willing to stare down the barrel of a gun for six bucks an hour. I can’t say that I blame them. Most of us wouldn’t do it for a hundred times that amount, especially for people we didn’t know. But the bigger surprise is this: the Good Shepherd is willing. He’s willing to lay down his life for a bunch of sheep who may or may not know him

and follow him. He's willing to lay it down for some poor folks in Chicago. He's willing to lay it down for you and for me.

Today we are remembering Nicole Hayek at our 11:00 service. An anthem has been commissioned in her memory. In case you didn't know, Nicole grew up at Zumbro. She was a graduate of Mayo High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stout. She played tennis. She went skiing. She loved spending time with her family. After college, she moved to Dallas to take a job with Ralph Lauren.

One incredibly sad night in December of 2008, Nicole suffered a severe stroke. A week later she was taken off life support. And six hours after that, she died. She was only 25-years-old.

In the weeks following, the family found out that Nicole was born with something called fibro muscular dysplasia, which is another way of saying that she had a weakness in one of her arteries in the brain. There was no way they could have known. Because of this condition, Nicole was going to live only so long.

In the midst of overwhelming heartache, a verse from Proverbs was especially meaningful for the family: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." Let's just say, it takes a lot of trust to go on with life when the bottom falls out. It takes a lot of trust to keep believing when someone you love is suddenly taken away.

The family went looking for assurance, some sort of sign that Nicole was okay. They didn't have to wait long. Nicole's cousin, Todd, had a six-year-old son named Parker. Parker was asleep when Nicole died. It was 9 o'clock at night. Parker's mom went in to check on him. Suddenly Parker woke up and said, "Mommy, Nicole's not afraid anymore."

Sometime later, Nicole's mother, Mary, had a dream. In the dream Mary saw her dad who'd been gone since 1988. He was in a field of flowers. The sun was shining. There was a gentle breeze. Her dad smiled at her and nodded. His message was simply this: "She's fine."

Friends, we live in a world of heartache and pain. We often don't know why things happen the way they do. Some days we're not even sure who we can trust. Here's one possibility: There is a shepherd who knows you. There is a shepherd who wants to take care of you. There is a shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for you. In fact, he already has. This shepherd is the one we call *good*.

"I come that you may have life," says the Shepherd, "and have it abundantly. I am *good*. You can trust me." Amen.