



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2015

“The Good Shepherd and the Hired Hand”

(John 10:11-14)

Rev. David K. Groth

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd” (Jn. 10:11-14).

COLLECT: Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

As a student in Germany I travelled once to the small city of Rottenburg. It's one of the best preserved examples of a medieval city. It's a walled city, with a castle and market square, the classic town hall with the clock tower, fachwerk homes and cobblestone streets. As you might imagine, lots of cuckoo clocks and beer steins are sold there.

I was walking along the wall which offered a nice view not just of the city but of the rolling hills outside the city. I noticed a shepherd and his dog on the hillside with about 50 grazing sheep. I thought to myself, "You've never talked to a real shepherd before. You should go talk to that guy." And so I did.

I made my way down to the pasture. It had been raining off and on all day. The shepherd was wearing a black trench coat and was sitting on a large rock. He looked miserable and was not particularly happy to see me. I guess one doesn't become a shepherd if he enjoys the company of people.

In any event I introduced myself and tried to strike up a conversation. His dog sat about fifteen feet behind me and with every exhaled breath, growled a low-burn growl. Whenever I turned and made eye contact with the dog he'd turn up the volume and raise one lip to show me his impressive incisors.

I asked the shepherd about sheep, and he told me they do indeed wander a lot, and that their wandering gets them into a lot of trouble, first, with that dog and then with him, and he found it very annoying, their desire to stray. He used the word "wanderlust". Every time I read, "All we like sheep

have gone astray, each to his own way” I smile a little, remembering that grumpy shepherd, and his grumpy dog and the word “wanderlust”. And I see myself doing that, straying, sometimes out of wickedness, sometimes out of aimlessness.

In any event, this shepherd didn’t have much of anything positive to say. In fact, I don’t think he much liked his job, nor the sheep, nor the little dog. In this day of cheap electric fences why was he out there in the first place? My suspicion is he was hired by the Rottenburg tourism bureau. Can you hear the conversation? “We have the wall, the cobblestones, the clock tower; all we need are some sheep and a shepherd out there to complete the picture.” That’s when the mayor suggested his ne’er-do-well brother-in-law was fired yet again and needed a job. Done deal!

In our text, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd” who lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who doesn’t own the sheep, when he sees the wolf coming, he flees.

In the Bible a hired hand was a laborer usually employed only for a limited time. They didn’t have a lot of skills, but they could pick up field stones before spring planting or help with the harvest of grapes or, in a pinch, even watch over a flock for a time. Typically, however, a hired hand moved from one menial gig to the next.

In Jesus’ day, a day’s wages for a hired hand was one denarius. You didn’t pay them much, nor did you expect much from them. Some worked hard; others didn’t. No matter – at the end of the day each received a denarius. In fact, since they were so poorly paid there were laws protecting them from exploitation. For example, Leviticus 19, “The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning” (v. 13). That is, pay him without delay because he might be depending on that denarius to feed his family.

The hired hand doesn’t really know the sheep because in all likelihood he hasn’t spent that much time

with them. The owner needed some extra help and brought him in for a time until a more permanent arrangement could be made.

Contrast that with a true shepherd. Many were born to the task. The family owned a flock, and a boy was sent out with the flock as soon as he was old enough to go. The sheep became his companions, friends even. To you and me sheep all look pretty much the same but a true shepherd recognizes them, knows their names, their personalities. The family's livelihood was all wrapped up in the welfare of the flock. You can imagine then the owners would be much more protective of the sheep, and would take greater risks to defend them.

Some of you remember the old Jack Benny Radio Show, and the legendary stinginess that was part of his radio persona. When a crook held him up and said, "Your money or your life", there was a long, silent pause as he thought it over. A hired hand didn't have to think it over. They were not his sheep. He didn't own them. He didn't really know them. And besides, he was paid one stinkin' denarius a day. To take on thieves and robbers or a pack of wolves was well above his pay grade.

I could be dead wrong about that guy outside of Rottenburg, but it seemed to me he thought little of the sheep and less still of being a shepherd. My guess is if someone pointed a gun at him and demanded mutton chops, he would have said, "Be my guest. Take that one over there too and I'll throw in the dog!"

"I am the good shepherd" Jesus said. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." He makes sacrifices for the sheep.

Pastors are called shepherds or "under shepherds." As in any vocation there are pastors who give the vocation a bad reputation. They neither work hard nor go out of the way to care for the sick or the grieving. They don't challenge themselves or others. Their preaching is careless if not from the hip. They got

in it for the wrong reasons and they stay in it for the wrong reasons, and as soon as things start going poorly they let the district president know they're ready for a new challenge. Hirelings. Those guys are out there but my experience is the vast majority are not like that.

Conversely, there are some congregations that **treat** their pastors and teachers as mere hirelings. Before I go on, I've never felt this way at Good Shepherd, but it's something to watch for in the life of the church. There are congregations out there that eat up their church workers like sunflower seeds and when they're done with them spit out the empty shells one after another. In the New Testament era hirelings were paid little but little was expected of them. With some church workers they're paid little and yet have the highest expectations put on them without the common courtesy of paying them any respect.

Don't you feel a little for the hireling in the text? He's probably not a true shepherd but he finds himself watching over a flock of sheep. A pack of wolves or a gang of thieves comes along and they're greedy and hungry. What to do? So he weighs his options. The lives of the sheep or his own life? The hireling doesn't own the sheep; he's just paid a denarius a day. He reckons his life is worth more. So he skedaddles. Who of us wouldn't?

I guess that's the critical difference. The hireling thinks about the money and his life and makes a perfectly reasonable decision. The good shepherd, on the other hand, thinks only about the sheep, and makes a perfectly unreasonable decision. He lays down his life for dirty, stupid, annoying and wandering sheep. Who would do such a thing? Only one who has spent a lot of time with them, one who knows them, considers them his friends, owns them. He lays down his life for them. It's not rational or prudent for a hired hand **or** a shepherd to lay down his life for sheep. Jesus has really nothing to gain. The demise of the flock would be no skin off his back . . . but for the fact that he loves them.

The salvation of the flock, on the other hand, would require much more than just skin off his back.

Jesus is the only shepherd that's worth talking about because he's the only shepherd who was flogged for you, the only shepherd who laid down his life for you. You too have stayed, sometimes out of aimlessness, at other times out of wickedness. Yet see how he loves you! You too have this wanderlust, this insatiable desire to stray, because the old sinful nature always thinks things are better and more fun when you put some distance between you and the shepherd and between his laws and yours. But a lamb who separates himself from the shepherd and the flock is heading towards catastrophe.

"I am the good shepherd", Jesus said. "I know my own, and my own know me." Notice that preposition "my" and the sense of ownership it reveals. He owns us, not like a slave master. No, he has this sense of ownership and responsibility for us. Though our sins belong to us alone, he takes ownership of them, and lays down his life for the sheep.

It's unthinkable for him to cut and run. That would be disastrous for the flock, and he can't stand the prospect of losing even one. Remember? He taught that God is like a shepherd who has 99 out of 100 sheep all present and accounted for. In a day before barbed-wire fences, those aren't bad numbers. 99%. As a student I'd be happy to see a 99% on top of any test or paper. The hired hands, seeing they had 99% would say, "Close enough. Let's call it a day." But for the Good Shepherd 99 is totally unacceptable, because that means there's one he knows and loves out there that is lost and vulnerable and alone, a sheep of his own fold, a lamb of his own flock, one for whom he would even exchange his life.

So what does he do? He leaves the 99 "in the open country", the text says, and tracks that one down and puts it on his shoulders and carries it back to the fold. The economics of it all (leaving the 99 in the open

country in order to find the one), that doesn't make any sense to us . . . *unless* you know you were the one who was by nature lost and vulnerable and alone until the Good Shepherd found you and picked you up and carried you home. Then we understand the parable, and we understand what kind of shepherd Jesus is.

That's what love does. It fights and struggles and searches and carries and forgives and restores and makes sacrifices. It does not give up.

That Jesus should lay down his life for us dirty old sheep, it must mean he loves us. How can we respond to that? What else can we do other than thank him and praise him, serve him and obey him. Amen.

