

I am the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-11

Last Sunday, we affirmed the wonderful truth: Jesus is the light of the world. Those of you who were at the 9:30 service heard the Praise team sing the Chris Tomlin Song: Jesus Loves Me. As I listened once again to that song I was struck by the powerful testimony of the words;

Jesus, He loves me, He loves me, He is for me

Jesus, how can it be, He loves me, He is for me

And it was a fire, deep in my soul. I'll never be the same. I stepped out of the dark and into the light, when he called my name.

I couldn't run, couldn't run from His presence, I couldn't run, couldn't run from his arms.

He holds the stars and He holds my heart

With healing hands that bear the scars

The rugged cross where He died for me

My only hope, my everything.

Thanks and praise to God who has given us Jesus, the light of the world.

I begin this morning with reference to a comic strip I used to read: How many of you have read Nancy...the precocious 8 year old who often has some comical insights into life. I came across one where Nancy is investigating products and items in the bathroom. She says: "Lotion to make your skin moist. Anti-perspirant to keep to keep dry. Crème rinse to keep your hair soft, Mousse to make it stiff. Scales to tell you how much you weigh, and scale adjustment so you don't really have to know." Finally she exclaims: "This placed isn't a bathroom. It's an oxymoron!"

We know what an oxymoron is: it's a combination of contradictory words or thoughts, consecutive set of words expressing conflicting meanings: A few examples: pretty ugly, constant change, in-depth survey, resident alien, authentic reproduction, jumbo shrimp. Seems strange to put two words together like that, but hearing mixed words like this causes the listener to pay attention to what is being said.

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Jesus knew the impact of words and most of us will remember the most famous oxymoron of Jesus, at least to his audience's ears: The Good Samaritan. I mean, the Samaritan was such a despised person in Jesus' day that it was hard for his hearers to put Good and Samaritan together. But I wonder if we are aware of an oxymoron Jesus used that may have made a similar impact: The Good Shepherd. When we hear Jesus declare these words in the Gospel of John, there is nothing particularly shocking about it. And most of us when we think about shepherds in the Bible picture a very positive and peaceful image. You picture shepherds caring for their flocks, calling them individually by name, risking life and limb to protect the lambs from wolves, or bears, or other predators. We think of those words from the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Or from Isaiah: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

Certainly these are very important descriptions of the nature and activity of God, and we can say with gratitude, that the Lord is our Shepherd. But with all this background on shepherd imagery in the Bible we fail to see the significance of Jesus words: I am the Good Shepherd. Jesus was employing an oxymoron. Because to say I am the good shepherd in the culture Jesus lived was almost scandalous. Here in first century Palestine, the shepherd was viewed, not only as a humble occupation, but also as one of the most despised trades. Why? Because in Jesus' day, many of the shepherds were considered to be thieves. Rather than being viewed as reliable and responsible, they were habitually known to graze on other people's lands, steal other people's sheep or produce. These shepherds, like the publicans and tax collectors were looked down upon. They were even deprived of their civil rights. They couldn't fulfill a judicial office or be a witness in court. There were laws about buying wool, silk, milk or goat from shepherds, because it was widely assumed that what they sold was stolen property. But Jesus makes this statement with impact: It is today's I Am Saying: "I am the Good Shepherd." Certainly Jesus knew that his words would cause disturbance among his hearers.

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But you notice that Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with the hireling shepherd. Someone hired to take care of the sheep. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, while the hireling shepherd flees in the face of wolves and cares nothing for the sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the One who is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sheep. We see Jesus going to the cross to die for us. We see Jesus, not like the shepherd who flees from the danger of losing his life, but he gives it up willingly for you and me. The message for this week's "I Am" saying is to be reminded of how much God cares for us. He is the one who is the open door where we can walk through in peace and safety.

In our chapter this week, Rev. Fuquay talks about the other image of this John 10 where Jesus describes himself as the door. He mentions how the sheep pens out in the countryside were enclosures with walls but the door was just a bare entrance. It was an opening for sheep to go in and out freely. He raises the question – How could the sheep stay protected without a door? It was the responsibility of the shepherd. The shepherd would lie down at night in the doorway. The shepherd would be the door. With that image, we can see who this Jesus is that loves us and cares for us. He is the door. In our moving about in life, in the times we need security, in the times we may go out into the pasture of life for adventure...it is the Good Shepherd who watches us, cares for us.

In my heart I can cry, the Lord is my Shepherd, he takes care of my every need. Even when things aren't going the way I had planned, even when life is hard or confusing, even in the most trying times. Yes, this is the Psalm written by a shepherd who exclaims: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me."

Just like last week, when we get hold the of the wonderful truth, that Jesus is our light and that we are called to be lights in this world, we too are given the call and ministry to be good shepherds in this world. All of us as followers of Jesus Christ, are shepherds, we have a shepherding ministry, whether our flock

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is our family, our place of work, our church, our community, we have been given ministry of caring for others.

Listen how John describes it in I John from the Message: “God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we’re free of worry on Judgment Day – our standing in the world is identical with Christ.”

When Jesus confronts Peter after Peter’s denial and after the resurrection, he asks him directly: Simon Peter, do you love me? Peter replies, Yes, Lord you know that I love you. Jesus gives him the opportunity to show his love and loyalty. Peter, feed my lambs. A second time Jesus asks and Peter replies with the same answer. Jesus says to Peter, tend my sheep. And a third time and Jesus gives this commission: Feed my sheep. We have the opportunity and privilege to also hear Jesus’ call: Tend my sheep, be in a shepherding ministry. Look around you. The common temptation of our day is to adopt the mentality of the hireling. The hired hand who only does the minimum, who looks out only for himself. You could apply that approach to any area of our lives. Maybe to see our role as parents as a necessary often burdensome task rather than an opportunity to shape and guide our children’s lives and be an example before them. Or we could look at our jobs as drudgery, something to endure from weekend to weekend. We become more concerned about our own needs and wants rather than caring and serving others. Yes, this is the temptation of our culture, but God calls us to a different way. The good shepherd has a different point of view. The good shepherd is willing to sacrifice his status of reputation or even his life for the welfare of others. The hireling only looks out for himself, doesn’t think about how his actions impact others.

I was thinking about that this week, when once again the news from Ferguson and now Oklahoma remind us that issues of race and racist attitudes are still very much a part of our society. And that the one who has the mentality of the good shepherd must stand for justice and be willing to break down the barriers

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that often divide people. I remembered the story that came out of Alan Paton's book, But Your Land is Beautiful.

During the time of Apartheid, Racial segregation in South Africa, Alan Paton tells the story of the Holy Church of Zion where the ritual of footwashing precedes Holy Communion.. The African pastor had invited a well known Judge Oliver to come to the church on Holy Thursday to wash the feet of Martha Fortuin, the African woman who had raised and cared for the judge's children. Judge Oliver, who was white, was a man of moral character and principle and accepted the invitation. During the footwashing service, Judge Oliver knelt before Martha and as he did so he remembered how she had often kissed the feet of his children. So after washing her feet in the ritual, he bent over and kissed her feet. There were many tears in the eyes of the parishoners of that small church.

Well, the press got a hold of this incident and began to give it wide publicity. With the policies that were in place in that time of Apartheid, it was not surprising that shortly thereafter Judge Oliver was denied the chief judgeship he had been promised. A few days later the pastor of the church called the judge to ask his forgiveness for involving him in an act that destroyed his professional career. The judge responded: Taking part in your service on Holy Thursday, was more important to me than any chief judgeship. Think no more about it. And because of that incident the people of this church renamed their church: The Church of the Washing of Feet.

That's the act of the good shepherd, willing to reach out when God is calling you, to show Christ's love and care for others, even when there may be sacrifice, even when there is risk, but most of all adhering to the principles of love God has placed in your heart. Jesus said, I am the good shepherd, in a day when shepherds were despised. But you know Jesus deliberately reached out to those who were often neglected or hurting so that they would know the depth of God's love. It was Jesus who entertained tax collectors and sinners. Jesus offered the love of a good shepherd who cares for his sheep. A good shepherd...an oxymoron...and our calling is the same, it seems contradictory to

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the world. Caring for the poor, loving our enemies, reaching out to those who the world has judged. Jesus calls us to love in the spirit of the good shepherd. In a world that often alienates, puts people into categories misuses, mistreats...Jesus says tend my sheep. It does require a good shepherd's heart, it sometimes requires sacrifice. But that's how Jesus loved, That Good Shepherd went all the way to the cross you and me.