

I am the Good Shepherd
John 10: 11 – 14
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
March 6, 2016

A little girl lived in New York City. Her mom and dad were faithful to Jesus Christ and the baptismal promises they had made when they presented their daughter for baptism. They took her to Sunday School and worship each week. One Sunday, on the way home from church, their daughter asked them, “Why did my Sunday School teacher say that Jesus was like a dog?”

Taken aback, they asked their daughter, “What do you mean? What did your Sunday School teacher say about Jesus?”

Their daughter replied, “She said that Jesus was the good ‘shepherd.’ I wondered why she would compare Jesus to our neighbor’s dog, Sherman. She is a good German Shepherd, but how is she like Jesus?”

Growing up in the city, this little girl had never seen a shepherd of sheep and the only shepherds she knew were the watch dogs some people kept in their apartments. So mom and dad took time to explain to her the other meaning of the word ‘shepherd.’ They explained how a shepherd watches the sheep. That is what a shepherd does. The shepherd knows the sheep. The shepherd leads the sheep. He protects the sheep from wolves and other dangers. When a sheep is lost, the shepherd searches for the lost sheep to bring it home safely. In short, the shepherd loves the sheep and cares for them. When the little girl’s Sunday School teacher said that Jesus was the *good shepherd*, she meant that all these things a shepherd does for the sheep, Jesus does for us. He knows us, leads us, protects us, searches for us, and loves us.

We are in the midst of our study of the seven “I Am” statements of Jesus from Joh’s gospel. We have heard Jesus declare that he is “the bread of life.” We saw how it is by his sacrifice, his redemptive death on the cross, that redemption and new life is made available to the world. Jesus also said that he is the “Light of the World.” In life, any search for meaning, fulfillment, or purpose must find itself in relation to the person and work of Jesus Christ. His life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension are at the center of human history. In his next “I Am” declaration Jesus said “I am the Door.” We saw a two-fold meaning to this statement. The first is prophetic and historical. Jesus is the promised Messiah. All the prophecies from the Old Testament find their fulfilment in him, in his life and ministry. Secondly, and in relation to his office as Messiah, Jesus Christ is the doorway to new life, to eternal life. As humans we search for meaning, religious truth and understanding. The doorway to true understanding, to true religion, is through faith in Jesus Christ.

Today we look at Jesus’ declaration that he is the “good shepherd.” What does he mean?

Introduction: What Does Jesus Mean When he says "I am the Good Shepherd"?

¹¹ I am the good shepherd.

In saying that he is the *good shepherd*, Jesus means three things. The first meaning is self-evident. The second meaning is less obvious, but quite understandable after

only a little reflection. However, Jesus' third meaning is unexpected, even downright surprising. The third meaning is unique to Jesus.

Let us look at each meaning in turn. The first meaning in saying that he is the *good shepherd* is that Jesus cares for his sheep. He cares for his people.

First Meaning: He cares for the sheep. He cares for his people. Ezekiel 34

Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?

In speaking to the people of ancient Israel, the image of shepherd was intended to be a synonym for leader. The shepherds of God's people were supposed to be the leaders of God's people: the heads of households, clans, tribes and, ultimately, the king. Ancient Israel's leaders were often described as "shepherds" of God's people. You will find this language in the prophets: Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Zechariah. And, not just biblical writers. Secular writers such as the Roman poet Virgil likened the role of the emperor to that of a shepherd to his people. As shepherd, God's leaders were to tenderly care for God's people: rule them, guide them and protect them. God's leaders were to put the needs of their people above their own needs.

The problem was this: the leaders of God's people rarely lived up to the standard God required of them. God's frustration with the failures of his appointed leaders reaches its apex in Ezekiel 34. Ezekiel declares, "The word of the LORD came to me: ² "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD." The shepherds of God's people are supposed to be leading, guiding, protecting and caring for God's people. But that is not what happens. The shepherds look out for themselves first. Ezekiel continues his indictment in chapter 34. "Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought." The shepherds seek their own good and benefit. They are not watching out for the needs of the flock.

In saying that he is the *good shepherd* Jesus is contrasting his role with that of the other spiritual leaders the people of Israel have known. As shepherd, Jesus is not seeking his own blessing or benefit. He comes as a servant. In an important sense, the emphasis of Jesus' words is upon the word "*good*." Jesus is the good shepherd in contrast to so many of Israel's past spiritual leaders who were not good, who sought their own benefit and not that of God's people.

Jesus cares for the sheep. He cares for his people. This is obvious in its simplicity. Being a dependable shepherd is an image of kindness and compassion. And, at the time of Jesus, the image of a shepherd was universal in its appeal. Shepherding was a common task throughout the Roman Empire. And, it is still a widely known and understood image. Travel today in modern Israel and you will undoubtedly see herds of sheep being watchfully overseen by faithful shepherds. The idea of a good shepherd is easily understood and grasped.

As an aside, the image of being a good shepherd is easily understandable, *if* you know what a sheep is. Like the little girl from New York City whom I mentioned at the start of this sermon, not everyone knows what a sheep is nor what a shepherd does. Shepherding is not known universally throughout the world. This image of Jesus as the *good shepherd* presents translation difficulties if the target language does not have words for 'sheep,' 'shepherd' or 'flock.' My listeners (readers) are familiar with sheep and shepherds. You grow warm and nostalgic at the thought of the faithful shepherd watching out for the needs of his flock of sheep. Think about Jesus as the "good shepherd" and you grow all warm and fuzzy inside. But, what if you have never heard of, or seen, a sheep? How is the translator to generate a comparable positive mental image of Jesus if the target language has no word for sheep? Can we (legitimately) hear Jesus say, "I am the faithful swineherd"? Would you grow warm and fuzzy imagining Jesus caring for pigs instead of sheep? But I digress.

It is against the background of pedigreed failure among Israel's princes and kings that Jesus' words should be understood. When Jesus says that he is the good shepherd, he is saying that as Israel's leaders were faithless, he would be faithful. As Israel's leaders were undependable, he would be dependable. In this way, the right emphasis in Jesus' saying is upon the word '*good*.' The past shepherds of Israel have not been 'good' for the people. At best they exploited the common people. At the worst they led them astray to worship other gods. Jesus would be "*The Good-Shepherd*," good for his people.

As we have noted in previous studies of the "I Am" statements, note Jesus' use of the definite article. He does not say, "I am [a] good shepherd." He says, "I am [the] good shepherd." Why does Jesus use this peculiar word choice?

Jesus is picking up a theme from Israel's prophets and using it to again point to himself. Each ancient prophet who denounced the poor shepherding of Israel's rulers also included the promise of a coming *good shepherd*. Here are some examples. The prophet Ezekiel wrote (34.23) "I will place over [my people] one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them." Remember, the reign of King David was the Golden Age of ancient Israel. The promise of this verse is that there would come a good shepherd, who would guide and protect and care for the sheep as David did. It is not a general promise of improved leaders, but a specific promise for a definite key leader. This leader would usher in a new age. He would be the Lord's anointed, the Messiah. Being the *good shepherd* is one of the attributes of the Messiah.

Jesus says that he is the *good shepherd*. He is affirming his watchful care and concern for the people of God. He is making an explicit Messianic claim: he is the one of whom the Prophets spoke. He is the one Israel had been waiting for. He is the one to restore the rule of David to the house of Israel.

This is the first meaning of Jesus' claim to be the good shepherd. He cares for the sheep. He cares for God's people. The second meaning is this: Jesus owns the sheep.

Second Meaning: He owns the sheep

¹² 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.

This second meaning is less obvious to us who are not well acquainted with

shepherding. Sheep are possessions: they are owned by the shepherd. One of the implications of the reality of Jesus being the Good Shepherd is that we [the sheep] are not our own. We belong to him for his good will and pleasure. Some may rebel against this teaching. In the modern world everyone wants to be an autonomous individual. We want to be our own man (or woman). For this reason, declaring that we are not our own is **not** calculated to win friends and influence people.

That said, the modern world's objection to this spiritual truth is unfortunate. Consider the first question and answer to the Heidelberg Catechism.

Question 1. What is [your] only comfort in life and death?

Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, (a) am not my own, (b) but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; (c) who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, (d) and delivered me from all the power of the devil; (e) and so preserves me (f) that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; (g) yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, (h) and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, (i) and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

We are not our own. We belong to Jesus. That is a comforting thought.

Realize, a shepherd is an autocrat. He is sovereign over the sheep. The shepherd is entrusted with life and death authority. He determines which sheep were sent to slaughter. The sheep belonged to him. It is helpful, I think, for us modern folk to be reminded that we are not our own. The ancient Roman poet Virgil wrote:

"Thus you bees make honey not for
yourselves,
Thus you birds build nests not for
yourselves,
Thus you sheep bear fleeces not for
yourselves.

You and I do not exist for ourselves. The good shepherd has a claim upon us. He is sovereign over us. My life is not my own. Your life is not your own. It is given to me, and to you, by the graciousness of Jesus our Lord. And, our life may be taken from us, at any time. This is the right of the shepherd.

Lois Ann and I sometimes talk together about the paradox of modern life. On one hand, many things are continually improving and so we live longer, more prosperous and healthy lives. On the other hand, life is still surprisingly precarious. A few weeks ago a man in India was killed by a meteorite falling from the sky. No one but God himself could predict such an untimely end. But such things happen.

And so, in the face of the unpredictability of life, we the sheep take comfort in knowing that Jesus, the good shepherd, watches out over us. Jesus is not a hireling. He is not interested in what the job pays. He is interested the sheep, the ones whom he cares for. Jesus has more than a casual interest in the lives of his people. In the work place, we have all experienced the reality of being under another person's authority. And, we all know sometimes the feeling that the boss is more concerned with his own career than ours. We take comfort in

knowing that such is not the case with Jesus. He may ask a lot of us, but he also does a lot; and, he cares a lot.

His great care for us is seen in that he knows his people intimately. In verse 14 Jesus says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me." The shepherd spent much of his life with the flock. Nothing can substitute for time spent together. Time creates a bond that is unmatched. This truth is seen in parent and child interaction. Mom and dad, mother and child, spend a lot of time together. That is as it should be. Children spell love T – I – M – E. People used to talk about spending "quality" time with their children: in contrast to spending "quantity" time with them. I do not hear that as much these days – which is a good thing. We cannot put "quality" time on a calendar. Instead, we spend a great deal of time with those whom we love, and give thanks when, in serendipity, some of that "quantity" time suddenly metamorphs into "quality" time. There is simply no substitute for time spent in one another's presence.

Lois Ann and I were visiting daughter Rebekah and her family last week and we took granddaughter Charlotte to the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga. This aquarium is world class. At one point they have created a good size, but shallow tidal pool. You can reach in and touch the fish as they swim by. There were perhaps a half a dozen different kinds of fish in the tank, maybe three to four dozen fish in the tidal pool. It was a good size display. I was surprised when the docent began introducing to us individual fish in the tank. Some of them even had names! I could not tell one from another. But the docent could identify individuals, and even describe their unique attributes. Why was she able to do so? She had spent time with them. Spending time meant that she got to know them, individually.

My friend, Jesus the good shepherd knows his sheep. Jesus knows us intimately. We know his voice, and he knows our needs and talents and capabilities and aspirations. For this reason, the tasks and challenges he gives us are unique to our abilities and talents. They are tailor made to evoke character and faith.

Jesus is the good shepherd. Shepherds are responsible for guiding sheep to food and water. Jesus, the good shepherd. He meets our physical needs and gives satisfaction of our spiritual needs. Sheep are led, not driven. A shepherd can drive goats, but not sheep. Jesus does not force us to follow him. We can wander, sheep do that. We can get lost, sheep do that. We can get in trouble, sheep do that. The promise is that the good shepherd will always be searching for us. The nature of the Shepherd is dictated by the nature of the sheep. Sheep are affectionate, unaggressive, relatively defenseless, stupid, and in need of constant care and supervision. Importantly, sheep need to be cared for: they are not capable of ruling themselves. They need supervision. Jesus is the true ruler of his people.

Jesus is the good shepherd. He cares for his people. He owns the sheep. And, thirdly, he dies for the sheep.

Third Meaning: He dies for the sheep

¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

This attribute is decidedly not obvious. It is downright surprising. In verse 11 Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." A shepherd dying for his flock would have undoubtedly been a very rare occurrence in Palestine.

The key thing to note is that while this would have been the exceptional mark of a shepherd in Jesus' day, it is the pre-eminent expression of Jesus' role as the Good Shepherd.

As in the previous "I Am" statements, there is a level of Messianic meaning in this. To be the Good Shepherd is a Messianic claim. Each prophet who prophesied regarding the Messiah did so from a limited perspective. The prophets saw the Messiah as a new king, like David, only better. That was the best they could imagine. Isaiah was giving a glimpse of something more, reflected in his "Suffering Servant" prophecy written in chapters 53 and 54. Jesus' words in this "I Am" statement is adding something more, something new: The Good Shepherd comes to die. In Isaiah 53 we encounter the prophecy of the Suffering Servant. It is clearly a messianic prophecy. But how is it that the Messiah would be expected to suffer? Jesus points to the answer: the good shepherd lays down *his* life for the sheep.

As we have noted, shepherds were common throughout the ancient world. As a result, wherever this passage was read, the images of shepherds would have been similar. And, for people who had experienced the reality of feeling exploited by the false shepherds, Jesus' words would have offered encouragement. In Jesus the one true shepherd would be found. And we know he is the one true shepherd because he did what no other shepherd has done: he came to die for the sheep.

Consider the hymn we often sing at Christmas time: "*I wonder as I wander.*"

"I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the savior, did come forth to die.
For Poor ornery people like you and like I,
I wonder as I wander, out under the sky.

Jesus came for a singular purpose: to die for his sheep. It is important to get this truth into the proper perspective. When we consider Jesus' life and ministry, we say that Jesus' teaching is important; we declare that Jesus' example is praiseworthy; we affirm that Jesus' character is exemplary; we uphold that Jesus' love for sinners is unmatched; we believe that Jesus' instruction to his disciples (and us) full of grace and truth. However, at the same time, we declare that it was the death of Jesus which was decisive!

Conclusion

I want us to conclude by thinking together about one other phrase used by Jesus in this passage, a phrase that I used as I welcomed you to our hour of worship this morning. In verse 14 Jesus tells us, I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. Jesus' message is that his sheep know his voice. Jesus Christ's sheep hear his call.

I want to illustrate the truth that Christ's sheep hear his call by briefly highlighting four very different Christian communities as I draw this to a close. These are Christian communities of which Lois Ann and I are very familiar. These illustrations are not from a book. Lois Ann and I have experienced these communities.

The first is the Turkish Presbyterian Church. Did you know that there is a Turkish Presbyterian Church? Just before Lois Ann and I left for vacation I received an email from Turgay, a key leader in the Turkish Presbyterian Church. Turgay and I have been friends for thirty years. When we first met and got to know each other, I was privileged to play a small role in helping Turgay to be established as a pastor, a preacher, and a leader of the church in

Turkey. I look back upon those days in the mid-1980's and I think, there was not much: a few Turkish believers here, and another group there. It did not look promising. But the sheep heard their master's voice. And over time, the church grew, and was established.

Flash forward to two Saturdays ago. Lois Ann and I attended a conference called Hope Rising in Ft. Meyer's, Florida. Hope Rising was a conference to offer encouragement, support and spiritual teaching for folk who struggle with same sex attraction (SSA) and those who seek to encourage and support them. What struck me as the conference unfolded during the day was the number of references the speakers made to similar groups that were meeting in other cities in Florida, and other states throughout the U.S. The wider culture in America embraces and celebrates SSA. That day I realized that the participants in the Hope Rising conference are all "under the radar." The wider culture is not aware. Why? Because the wider culture does not hear the good shepherd's voice. But these folk were gathered because they know their Lord's voice and call.

The next day, two Sundays ago, Lois Ann and I attended worship at the small club house in the retirement village where my mom lives. The song leader was very good. The hymnals were Baptist. The preacher was a fisherman from Maine. (I loved listening to his accent!) The song leader and the preacher both live in the park. During the winter months they lead worship in the clubhouse each Sunday. Again, there is no web site advertising their worship gathering. They are not listed in the yellow pages. The services only happen during the high season. The sheep – or in this case, the snow birds – hear the master's voice.

Last Sunday was the only gathering of what I might call traditional Christian worship I experienced. We were at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, TN. You would feel at home there: it offers great preaching and teaching, an outstanding music program and small group ministries.

Think about these four gatherings of worshipping communities. There is the Turkish Presbyterian Church, slowly being established and taking root in the Muslim nation of Turkey. The Hope Rising folk and their unique ministry outreach. The clubhouse gathering of the winter residents in Bonita Springs. And the good people of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga. The only traditional church is Covenant. The Turkish Presbyterian Church is becoming more public and established over time. Still, for the most part, these ministries fly under the radar screen. The only people who know about them are those who participate. They are unnoticed. But they are real. They gather because they hear the shepherd's voice. He calls, and draws them to one another and to himself.

You are here this morning. Let me ask you, "Have you heard the voice of the Good Shepherd?" He knows you. He will lead you. He will protect you. He will care for you. Turn to him in believing faith. Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd. He seeks to be your shepherd. Believe in him.

Say "Amen" Somebody.

John 10:11 – 21

¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²He 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. ¹³He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”