

The Good Shepherd

A Sermon on John 10:1-18 by Rich Holmes

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When I was writing my dissertation in graduate school, I spent a lot of time researching something that the ancient Greeks were big believers in, and that is something called the unity of the virtues. You may ask, pastor, what on earth is that and what does it have to do with today's bible passages? Well, basically the ancient Greeks, that is, people like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, thought that if you are a good person in one way, then you are a good person in every way. In other words, if you are an honest person, someone who tells the truth and doesn't cheat on his spouse, then you are also sure to be a fair person. They must treat people the way they deserve to be treated. And if you are a fair person, then you are likely to be a generous person. And if you are a generous person, well, you get the idea, I don't need to belabor the point.

Well, I think we all can wish that those we know to be good people in one way are good people in every way. But I think a little experience in life eventually teaches you that this ancient Greek idea simply isn't true. People are a lot more complicated than that. Martin Luther King, who was obviously a wonderful man in so many ways, someone who gave his life in the pursuit of justice also cheated his way through graduate school. Oscar Schindler, a man who saved so many Jewish people during the Holocaust, the hero of the movie Schindler's List was also a terrible womanizer. And if you've ever seen the Godfather, or Goodfellas or the Sopranos, you know that Mafia bosses who show tremendous love and affection toward members of their own family can of course be cruel and murderous toward those outside the family. Perhaps that famous moment of dialogue between Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz sums

it up best. "You're a very bad man." "Oh no my dear, I'm a very good man. I'm just a very bad wizard."

But while people can be quite complicated and complex creatures morally, there is at least something about this ancient Greek idea that seems true, and in fact I would even go so far as to say I think we all know it to be true. If you show me someone who is good to animals, who shows kindness and compassion and affection toward animals, then I'll show you someone with a good heart, no matter what else might be wrong with them. And if you show me someone who is cruel to animals, then I'll show you someone you better be careful around, no matter how nice they come across to you. And again, I don't think this is just an idea of mine, I think this is something we all know to be true.

Today in our gospel lesson we hear Jesus comparing himself to a good shepherd. The image of a shepherd is, as you probably know, not the only image Jesus used to talk about the divine; there are countless others. Jesus also used seeds to talk about God, he used a vine with branches, he used the image of a lost coin, he used the image of a lost son; he used the images of bread and light and judges. I could of course go on and on. And sometimes people have asked me why all these images. Why not just speak about God plainly? Well, the answer is pretty obvious, I think. Because the idea of God is abstract and obscure, and a little hard to wrap your mind around. I have a hard time understanding how a being could be all powerful and eternal and everywhere, and yet invisible and having no physical body, but I can understand what a coin is, I can understand what a seed is, I can understand what a vine is.

Now, I guess if some of you were here this morning you might say to me, I hear you Pastor Rich, I have a pretty hard time understanding what God is, but as hard as it is for me to

understand what God is, I don't find the image of a shepherd especially helpful. Yeah, I know what you mean. There just aren't too many shepherds running around North Canton these days. But while you may know nothing about sheep and shepherds, you know what an animal is, and you know what it is to care for animals. You know what it is for an animal to trust you. You know what it is for an animal to trust you because it knows that it can depend on you to be fed and sheltered, to receive affection and a gentle touch. You know what it is for an animal to sense that the world is a harmful and dangerous place, but no harm will ever come from you, and it listens for the sound of your voice.

Have you ever known someone who puts their absolute trust in God? I don't just mean they trust God a little bit, or on some days, but they wake up every day believing that no matter what that day brings, no harm will ever come to them because they rest in God's arms. I don't think there are a whole lot of people in this world with faith like that, but there are some, and if you've ever known someone like that, you probably also know that in general, there are two kinds of responses to people like that. One response is to say "How I admire such people. How I envy someone who has such a gift of faith." But another response is to say "How naïve someone like that must be. How crazy they must be."

But when I look at this passage, and when I look at this twenty-third Psalm that many of us might know by heart, I don't see anything naïve. I don't see anything which says the world is all sunshine and rainbows and happiness. What I see rather is the sober acknowledgement that the world is a dangerous place. Jesus does not say because of me there are no thieves. He says the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy, but that's not why I have come. I have come

that the sheep might have life and have it in abundance. The twenty-third Psalm does not say I will never walk through the valley of the shadow of death, it does not say there is no valley of the shadow of death, it says even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil. And finally this psalm does not say everyone is a friend and I will never have any enemies, it says you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

And though we may know nothing about shepherds and sheep, as I said a moment ago, animals also sense the world is a dangerous place. They know they have natural predators out in the wild, and if they weren't aware of how dangerous these predators are they could not survive—and they sense danger even when there is none. Your dog Fido probably senses danger from the mailman or from people who knock on doors he doesn't know. Fido senses danger all around himself. But he also knows he can trust his master, in spite of how dangerous this world is. He knows he can trust in you whose voice is familiar and which he can recognize when you call to them, even when you are out of sight.

So is it crazy to have that kind of faith? Maybe whoever you knew who had that kind of faith couldn't really explain why they had it and other people didn't. But I bet if you've ever known someone like that, you would have traded everything you have, everything you have to have the kind of gift that they have. If you've never known someone like that, maybe you don't know what I'm talking about, but if you ever have known someone like that, I would bet my last dollar that you do.

When I was in Seminary, I was doing an internship as a chaplain in an urban Atlanta hospital. And when I was doing this internship I would visit patients as I would go from room to room sticking my head in the door and checking up on them seeing if they wanted to talk.

Sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't, but then one day I got a note from a nurse who said there was a patient who asked to see me. So I dropped in this patient's room, he was a man that I guess was in his early seventies, his name was Jack and it was clear to me that Jack was on his way out. I asked Jack why he was in the hospital and he had a list, almost a grocery list of things that were wrong with him. It was easier to list the things that were right with him than things that were wrong with him. He was in bad shape. I could also tell that Jack was pretty anxious about facing death. So I tried talking to him about all the promises of God and the promises of the bible, and he was polite enough to listen to me, but I could also tell I wasn't really saying anything that helped much. But then I noticed that sitting in a table in Jack's room there was an illustrated bible, like a child's bible, and it looked tattered and torn and though I didn't ask him, I wondered if it wasn't the same picture bible that he had when he was a child. So I said, Jack do you mind if we look through some of the pictures of this bible. That would be fine. And there were as you can imagine all the same pictures you'd expect to find in a picture bible. There were illustrations of Adam and Eve and Noah's ark, there was Daniel in the Lion's den and then we came across a picture of Jesus surrounded by sheep and holding one little lamb in his arms. And I said Jack, tell me about this picture. Tell me what it says to you. And I don't think I need to tell you what he told me. I think you already know what he told me. And then I said Jack, I'd like to have a prayer with you if that's ok. Sure. So we prayed and as we finished praying I said Jack I think I'd better go, and I'll never forget he looked at me with a single tear running down his cheek and he said "Rich, it's going to be ok, isn't it." "Yes, Jack, yes it is."

I don't think I need to tell you what Jack said because I think you already know what it is to be someone that animals put their complete trust in. Animals who cannot listen to reason, or persuasive arguments, or any amount of logic but who know instinctively when you are trustworthy and when you are not. I think that tells us everything we need to know.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid. For you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever. Just one more.

The Lord is my shepherd, I will always have everything I need. He gives me green pastures to lie in. He leads me by calm pools of water. He restores my strength. He leads me on right paths to show that he is good. Even though I walk through a valley as dark as the grave, I will not be

afraid of any danger, because you are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me. You prepare a meal for me in front of my enemies. You welcome me as an honored guest. My cup is full and spilling over. Your goodness and mercy will be with me all my life, and I will live in the Lord's house a long, long time.