

Following the Shepherd

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

Delivered on May 5, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

Sometimes you can use a phrase every single day of your life and you think you know what it means, even though you really have no idea what it means. Take, for example, when someone uses the phrase “That’s good.” Now, you may think you know what someone means when they say “That’s good”, but do you really?

Suppose you play a friend of yours in chess, checkers, euchre or whatever it is you play and you win and your friend loses. You might say “That’s good” and what you would mean by that is that the fact that you won is good for you. But you wouldn’t expect your friend to say the fact that you won is good. It wasn’t good for your friend after all.

In my opinion, nothing is ever just good, *period*. It is always good in some way or it is good as something if it does what that something is supposed to do. It is good for me if I win a game and it is good for my friend if he wins. But it isn’t just good *period*. A car is a good car if it does what it is supposed to do. It starts when you turn the key. It doesn’t break down. It will get you from here to there. But it isn’t just good *period*. A doctor is a good doctor if she does what doctors are supposed to do, heal patients, and not leave you with a bill that makes you feel even worse. But she isn’t just good *period*.

Well, if I am right then what does Jesus mean in this passage when he compares himself a good shepherd? If I am right, then what he is comparing himself to is a shepherd who does what shepherds are supposed to do. But just what is that? They are supposed to watch after sheep. They are supposed to make sure that sheep are fed and cared for and watched out in the pasture so that thieves don’t come along and snatch them away, and they’re also supposed

to guide the sheep because sheep are prone to wander off. They wander away from the flock where they can get attacked by wolves or where they can fall into ditches or where they can get lost. In these cases the good shepherd is one who does what shepherds are supposed to do by going out and looking for the sheep, calling out to them and having them respond to his voice. The good shepherd is one who also loves his sheep, the sheep know him and he knows each of the sheep as if by name, and that is unlike a bad shepherd. Jesus doesn't talk about bad shepherds in this passage but he talks about hired hands, who are paid to watch over the sheep like some baby sitter you pay to watch your kids. A good hired hand would not necessarily make a good shepherd any more than a good baby sitter would make a good parent. Even the best baby sitter doesn't know your kids or love your kids in the way that you do, they are just watching them for the money. Oh, they may do a great job of watching your kids, I'm not saying they wouldn't, but they certainly wouldn't lay down their lives for them. But that is what the shepherd is supposed to do, Jesus reminds us and that is therefore what a good shepherd does.

As I describe the way a shepherd is supposed to be, it is clear that the relationship that a shepherd is supposed to have with his sheep is one of absolute trust. Sheep are not particularly intelligent animals, but they know that the sound of the shepherd's voice signals safety, it signals security and because they aren't intelligent if they did not know this, they wouldn't survive. Left to their own devices they would wander into danger or into starvation, and so they rely on their complete trust of the shepherd for their own survival.

The famous psychologist Erik Erikson said that the first stage of psychological development for a child when it comes out of the womb is the stage where it develops a sense of trust. Before a child learns anything else, before they learn to walk or to talk or to count to ten, they

learn to trust. Like sheep, we also cannot survive without trust. You obviously cannot have a marriage or even a friendship without trust, but think of all the other things you can't do without trust. When you turn on the faucet to get a drink of water, you trust that the local water supply has not been poisoned. When you walk across a bridge you trust the engineers who have designed it so that it won't collapse. When someone stops their car and waves you across the street as you've probably seen people do a hundred times, you trust that they aren't going to run you over. We are born needing to trust just like we are born needing oxygen, food water and shelter. But here's the problem, the older we get, the more we find that people just aren't all that trustworthy.

"Mommy, mommy, a child says, "you should buy that glass cleaner, that lady on t.v. looks really happy cleaning windows."

"Yes, honey, that's called *advertising*."

"Mother, I can't believe he would break my heart like that. He told me he loved me."

"Yes, sweetheart, all the boys say that."

"Professor, I don't understand why I am doing so poorly in your class, I've made straight As in everything I've ever done before."

"Yes, son, that's called *grade inflation*."

We need to trust, we need to trust in order to survive. But the older you get the more you find that so many people you put your trust in turn out not to be all that trustworthy.

But is our Lord trustworthy? Is Jesus trustworthy? And isn't that the central question of our lives? In this journey from birth to death as we are searching for someone to put all our trust in, as we are searching to fulfill that fundamental need to trust, can we place our trust in our Lord?

I think that is the central question of our lives, because when it's all said and done, what else matters? Are our choices about what career path to choose and what to study in school and whom to marry and how many children to have and where to live when we retire, are any of these choices as important as the decision of whether our Lord is trustworthy? Some people have asked this question in all seriousness, they've given it due consideration and they have come away saying "No. Faith in Christ is just one more thing that is going to let us down. It is one more form of foolishness." We may have names for such people: atheists, agnostics, nonbelievers, non-Christians, and so on and so forth. They have made a conscious decision that putting their trust in Christ is not worth the risk of another disappointment. But haven't all of us at some time or in some area of our lives said that putting our trust in Christ is not worth the disappointment?

What if tomorrow your life suddenly changed as you had an undeniable sense that our Lord is speaking to you by name. What do I mean by that? Well, I don't know. Pick whatever way you want. Maybe our Lord would appear to you in a dream—maybe in a vision, maybe in the words that someone else speaks to you but that you instantly recognize as the word of the Lord. It doesn't matter how it happens. But what if the word of the Lord came to you and called on you to abandon everything that was important to you for the sake of doing some crazy thing that God wants you to do: to quit your job, to sell your house and your car, and everything you have, to buy a one-way ticket to another part of the world and become a missionary—to go back to school and become a nurse or a social worker--to give everything you have to the poor. Would you trust enough to follow—to follow unhesitatingly, to follow immediately, to follow unreservedly? If not, why not?

Ralph was a man in a small town where I used to preach. Ralph was a construction worker. He was also a deer hunter and a Vietnam helicopter pilot. He was as tough as they come. Ralph also used to hang out in a local diner with all other men in town whose wives would all go to church on Sunday while they all stayed home. I walked into that diner one morning and someone said something like “Here’s the good reverend to come in and tell us all about Jesus.”

I said, “No, I’m just here for the breakfast, just like you.” But, I was not like them and I knew it. This was not the diner where the church people hung out. Now, Ralph’s wife was named Sarah, and one time I was over at Ralph and Sarah’s for a birthday party. I found myself alone with Ralph for a minute and I said, “Ralph why don’t you ever come to church?”

“Nobody’s ever asked me to come.”

I said “I’m asking you.”

Ralph was John Wayne, Clint Eastwood and Chuck Norris all rolled into one. But as tough as he was an expression came over his face that made him look like a small frightened child. He said to me, “The guys at the diner, what if they all laugh at me?” The guys at the diner were the only world that Ralph knew. That was his identity. He was one of those guys at the diner—and I’m sure the idea of their laughing at him for going to church was truly scary. But eventually Ralph starting coming to church, he joined and I baptized him because he had never been baptized. Whether the guys at the diner all laughed at him, I do not know. But I think what Ralph did in joining our church took more courage than anything he had ever done in his life including fly helicopters in the Mekong Delta.

The gospel of our Lord is not for the faint of heart. It is not easy to put your trust in Christ. I am sure it was hard for Ralph. It is hard to place your trust in someone when placing your trust

in that one may mean that you will be called “crazy”, when it may mean that you will be laughed at, when it may mean you will abandon everything you have ever known.

Because placing all your trust in Christ is not easy, one thing we can do is lie to ourselves and tell ourselves that the good shepherd is not calling us to place all our trust in him. That, unfortunately, is a common strategy people use as they are confronted with the words of Christ in the scriptures. And so, when Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell all that he has and follow him, people say Jesus would never really tell someone to give away everything he had, what he must mean is not to become *too attached* to our possessions and worship them. And when Jesus called would be disciples to leave everything behind and follow him, he didn't really mean for them to leave everything behind but only to leave everything behind *that they loved more than him*. And when Jesus tells us to seek first the kingdom of God, of course he couldn't mean not to seek after money and power and status first for how are we to live otherwise? He must mean to seek the kingdom of God first *in our hearts*. (Whatever that might mean). In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it is as if a father sends his child to bed, and the boy says 'Father tells me to go to bed, but he really means that I am tired, and he does not want me to be tired. I can overcome my tiredness just as well if I go out and play. Therefore, though father tells me to go to bed, he really means 'Go out and play.'"¹

We can tell ourselves over and over that Jesus is not calling us to place all our trust in him, but I think that deep down we all know that he is, and we have to decide whether or not he is trustworthy, or whether he will let us down and lie to us in the same way we've been let down and lied to so many times before.

¹ Bonhoeffer, D. (1959). *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York: Macmillan.p.81

Jesus says “I am the good shepherd...and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Do you believe that? And isn’t that the most important question you could ever ask yourself?