

Sermon – April 21, 2024
“One flock with one shepherd”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 10:11-18

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! As we move through the season of Eastertide, we not only encounter many of the appearances of Jesus to his disciples that are documented in scripture, but we also look back at some of the memories of Jesus' life with his disciples, which they began to recall after Jesus' death and resurrection. That is the case this morning as we look at the scripture that is a witness to Jesus calling himself the Good Shepherd. The Greek word translated as “good” in the scripture reading does not so much point us to a diligent shepherd who cares well for the sheep as it does to a shepherd whose care for the sheep is beautiful. The idea is not physical beauty as physical form, but beautiful work done as sheep are cared for by the shepherd.

In contrast, Jesus tells us to look at the hired hand who is to work with the sheep but who does not own the sheep, and when difficulty and threats arrive, he leaves the sheep and looks to his own interests. As a result, the sheep are left alone and are snatched away or scattered by the coming of a wolf. The hireling is not like the Good Shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep in order to keep them safe. We might be reminded of David's comments to King Saul as he prepares to go out to do battle with Goliath. David tells Saul that he has taken sheep back from the jaws of lions and bears with his bare hands, needing no weapon to subdue them, and as a result, he has no fear of a slow-moving giant; even more does he lack fear when he knows God is present to help him. David has watched sheep and has been a good shepherd for the small flock he watched over. David is willing to place his life at risk in order to protect the flock under his care. David does not let an enemy snatch his sheep but risks his life to restore the sheep to the flock. When speaking to the people of Israel, Jesus uses this familiar example of one caring for sheep as an illustration of how he will care for those who follow him. Jesus will not simply put his life at risk for the sheep of his flock; he will die that they might have life. Jesus will lay down his life. He will die in the place of the sheep in his flock so that they might be kept safe for eternity. During the time that Jesus was with his disciples, he made many of these "I am" promises to his disciples. He told them, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). After giving sight to the man born blind, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). When he fed the five thousand, he declared, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). He later said, "I am the door of the sheep" (10:7)"ⁱ and now Jesus tells his disciples and those listening to his teaching, "I am the good shepherd" (10:10).

When Jesus begins to speak to the crowds about shepherds, he not only touches upon a familiar idea that they would see on almost a daily basis, as shepherds cared for the sheep among and around the people of Israel, but he also touches on a connection to the history of Israel. The idea of shepherds runs deep through Israel's history. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were shepherds. Moses was watching over flocks when he turned aside to investigate the burning bush. We might remember Joseph's brothers were shepherding sheep when they decided to get rid of Joseph. They were keepers of their father's flock, but their own brother they sent to Egypt as a slave bound in fetters. We already mentioned that David went from being the keeper of his father's few sheep to defeat Goliath and become a great king of Israel. When Jesus speaks to being *the* Good Shepherd and not just another good shepherd, all these past leaders of Israel, all of these

past men of God, would have come to the minds of those listening to Jesus' teaching. The people would hear in Jesus teaching his claim to be a better shepherd, the Good Shepherd, exceeding those shepherds of Israel who came before him.

Those who knew the scriptures well, such as the Pharisees and Sadducees among the crowd listening to Jesus, would also recall Ezekiel's prophecy to Israel about other shepherds, other leaders of Israel, who were not good. When Ezekiel accused the leaders of Israel of being poor shepherds, he said, "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them." ⁱⁱ When Jesus claims to be the Good Shepherd, he contrasts himself with the leaders in Jerusalem, leaders he is calling hirelings who let the flock be snatched and scattered. As Jesus claims to be the Good Shepherd, a singular shepherd, the leaders of Israel would hear an accusation against themselves as having failed through their strict adherence to the Law and their focus on helping others keep the Law by pointing out failures. Jesus is telling these leaders they have failed in their attempt to be good shepherds. He is telling them they have missed something. He is telling them there is something not good about their shepherding or leadership. When Jesus makes his claim of being the Good Shepherd, he echoes the words of the prophet Ezekiel as a claim that the Pharisees and Sadducees have failed to do what God sent them to do for His people and asserts that he will do what they have failed to do. The people in the crowds might miss this aspect of Jesus' claim, but the leaders of Jerusalem do not. They hear Jesus' words as criticism of themselves and as a claim that they have not done what God asks of them. They will not accept Jesus' words.

Jesus states the promise that he is the Good Shepherd twice in our text. The first time he states the promise, he follows it with a description of what the Good Shepherd does: he lays down his life for the sheep. The second time that he states the promise he follows the claim with a description of why he is the Good Shepherd. Notice how Jesus describes the claim he makes that he is the Good Shepherd. As the Father knows him and he knows the Father, so also he knows his sheep. The love that Jesus has for the Father and the Father has for Jesus, the perfect love shared between the Father and Son, is the same love Jesus has for his sheep. The perfect love of the Father and Son is how Jesus knows his sheep and they know him. Those who are in Jesus' flock know the love Jesus has for them, and they in turn are filled with and enabled through Jesus' sending of Holy Spirit to love Jesus with this same love. Jesus speaks to this love

as the laying down of his life for the sheep, an act that we Easter people know as Jesus' suffering, shedding his blood, and dying on the cross for us, his people. The love of Jesus for us is cruciform love, love defined by a willingness to die that we might live. Jesus' act of love on the cross, where he paid our debt of sin, a debt we could not repay, is the purchase of us as the sheep for his flock. Through the laying down of his life, Jesus becomes the owner of his sheep, and he will not run away when the sheep are threatened or harassed. Jesus will stay and defend his sheep with his life. Jesus is not a hired hand; he is the owner. The sheep in Jesus' flock are bought with the price of his blood and life.

Notice how Jesus describes the sheep he owns. There are not just the sheep of Israel. There are also other sheep who do not belong to the fold that the leaders of Israel understand to be God's people. There are other sheep that Jesus must bring, sheep who will listen to his voice. In Jesus there will be one flock and he is the one shepherd. In the understanding of the leaders of the Jews, there was a separation between the descendants of Abraham who were the people of God and all the rest of the world. Only by strict adherence to the Law of God could a person begin to move from the Gentile world to become one of the people of God. The leaders of the Jews had made themselves into the gatekeepers and the shepherds for God's people, and they held to a deep separation between Jews and Gentiles. As Jesus describes his flock, he includes Jews and Gentiles as part of the Good Shepherd's flock. Again, the leaders of the Jews are challenged by what Jesus has promised and will reject what Jesus has told them, holding to themselves as the only legitimate gatekeepers for God's people. We have this same struggle today if we are not diligent. The separation we have today is between believers and those who are lost in the world. They are outside the flock, yet they have been purchased by Jesus' death on the cross. Those outside of the flock will listen to Jesus' voice and become part of his flock if someone is sent to them and goes and presents the Gospel in a manner they can respond to. Jesus makes it clear that there is one shepherd, one flock, and one love.

Let's look at the promise of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. There is one shepherd. Jesus is the one shepherd. He alone has given up his life, shed his blood to purchase his sheep. Jesus alone has risen from the dead and is now seated at the right hand of the Father and invites us to be seated there with him through Holy Spirit. The world will claim there are many ways to the Father. Jesus does not recognize the world's claim. Jesus has an exclusive claim as the way to the Father and yet Jesus is inclusive, in that all are invited through belief in him to become part

of his flock. Jesus alone has died for the sins of his flock. Jesus alone has been raised from the dead. Jesus alone sits at the right hand of the Father. No matter how alluring the latest promise of the world to bring humanity into the fullness of life might seem, only Jesus can make that claim and bring his sheep into eternal rest. We have one shepherd who loves us and all in the world, and we are to listen to his voice. We are to be those who read, study, and hold onto the Word of God made flesh. We are to be those who listen for his voice and allow him to lead us to lie down in green pastures, places of rest, healing, and life. He will lead us beside the still waters that are peaceful places for us to tarry. Jesus the Good Shepherd will restore our souls. With Jesus as our shepherd, even when the shadows of death are cast upon us, we will not fear. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who comforts us. With Jesus, our cup overflows, our joy is complete. With Jesus' leadership as our shepherd, we have been brought into a flock where there is goodness, mercy, justice, and eternal dwelling in the house of God.

There is only one flock. As members of these local congregations of Afton and Fairfields, we choose to follow Christ as members of the Global Methodist Church, holding to the doctrine and polity of that denomination as a guide as we seek to live as sheep in Jesus' flock. We should not lose sight of the fact that there are other sheep in other denominations who have decided to live out their earthly lives as those who follow Jesus and seek to live under the doctrine and polity of their chosen denomination. But there is only one shepherd, Jesus Christ, and only one flock, the one Jesus leads. The church universal that is made up of all of the sheep whom Jesus purchased with his blood, life, and resurrection and who have come to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as their savior is the one flock. All who hold to the faith of the apostles as stated in The Apostles' Creed are members of the one flock. They may live out their earthly lives under the guidance of other denominations, but we were all bought by the Good Shepherd through his love for us on the cross. John Wesley stated this idea as "*If thine heart is as my heart, if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: give me thine hand.*"ⁱⁱⁱ If we have the love of God and love of neighbor, we will be able to disagree over the nonessential aspects of how we seek to follow Jesus and come together as one flock in spite of those disagreements as we love each other as Jesus loves us. This brings us to the last point, one love.

There is only one love, the perfect love of the Father and the Son. We glimpse perfect love as Jesus dies on the cross. This is the one love the Son shows us. It is the love for the Father

and love for us that was made into flesh so that we can look to the cross and begin to grasp the one love. It is the love the Son, through his sacrifice, has invited us into, a love that we are to reflect into the lives of others who are outside of the flock of believers, those whom Jesus also purchased to be sheep in his flock. We are to reflect the one holy love of the Father and the Son in our lives as we follow the Good Shepherd into his mission for all people. We, like the Good Shepherd, are to surrender our lives, surrender ourselves, to the steadfast love of God that is seen in Jesus' love for us, a love that shines from the cross into our hearts. The presence of the love of Jesus in our lives leads us to respond with the one love we have been shown to those who are part of the one flock of Jesus as well as to those who are not yet part of Jesus' one flock. We show our love for each other by encouraging each other, using the gifts and graces that Jesus has given to us. As we grow in our love for Jesus, as we experience new depths of the steadfast love of Jesus for a sheep of his flock, we also are to be those who are going out into the world filled with the love of Jesus to share his love with others so that they may experience the one shepherd, one flock, and one love. Our surrender is to the one shepherd so that we may follow him in a manner that all people may come to know the one shepherd, be part of the one flock, and know the one love of the Father.

Pray with me: Father, the perfect love you shared with your Son, and he shares with you seems so far away, yet our hearts yearn to experience the fullness of such love. Jesus, thank you for laying down your life in love for us that we might become sheep in your flock. Holy Spirit come and fill us with this one love that Jesus shares with the Father and lead us to share your love with others that they may come into the one flock. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Go forth into Jesus' mission.

ⁱ Oden, Thomas C.. *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (p. 238). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition

ⁱⁱ NRSV 1 Kings 34:4. Kindle Version

ⁱⁱⁱ Sermon on the Catholic Spirit.