

“Unlike the Hireling”

John 10:11-18
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Somewhere in the Mother Goose collection of rhymes and stories there is one that goes,

Little boy blue come blow your horn,
The sheep's in the meadow the cow's in the corn.
Where's the little boy who looks after the sheep?
Under the haystack fast asleep.

I can picture this rhyme on the page with its illustration of livestock wondering all over the place, a mountain of hay stacked neatly by the fence, and a little boy, with a broad-brimmed hat, dosing as if all were right with the world. As a child, I listened to an adult read the rhyme and I'm sure I giggled; I saw the picture and laughed. It was all a game.

But juxtapose the Mother Goose rhyme with the “I am the Good Shepherd” saying of Jesus, and a sobering attitude kicks in. “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” Unlike Little Boy Blue, this Good Shepherd will not be found asleep under the haystack, unaware or unconcerned about the health and the welfare of the flock.

In our Confirmation class, we have been studying the “I am” statements of Jesus. “I am the Bread of Life.” “I am the Resurrection.” “I am the Light of the world.” These statements of self-disclosure offer fascinating insight into the mind of Christ. Today we have, “I am the Good Shepherd.” Today, the whole church is in the Confirmation class!

In this passage from John's Gospel, Jesus defines this rich metaphor, the Good Shepherd, by talking about its opposite, the hireling. The modern reader can assume that there was in Biblical times a clearly recognizable difference between a shepherd and a hireling. The hireling let things fall through the cracks with a 'ho hum' attitude.

A lamb would come in from grazing with a noticeable limp, and the hireling might say, "Oh well, get over it!" A sheep might come down with a fever in the night, and the hireling might say, "No big deal," and go back to sleep. One hundred sheep might head out from the choral in the morning, only ninety nine return at dusk, and the hireling thinks to himself, "Ninety nine, one hundred, who's counting?"

By contrast, Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." There is an intimacy here. There is a familial feel. To the Good Shepherd, these are not lambs and sheep; these are brothers and sisters. To the Good Shepherd, these are not livestock with a number stapled in their ear; they are God's sons and daughters with a name and a one-of-a-kind personality and a one-of-a-kind situation. Unlike the hireling, who seems to think that the sheep are there to some how serve his needs; the Good Shepherd is there to serve the needs of those who have been entrusted to his care.

When the Good Shepherd is on duty, every wound is noticed and tended to, anointed and bandaged. When the Good Shepherd is on the scene, every fear is taken to heart, every anxiety taken seriously. The Good Shepherd sings a lullaby until every fear is vanquished, just as a mom will sing until all the children are fast asleep. Our dad would sing to us at night:

Day is done, gone the sun, from the lake, from the hill,
from the sky, all is well, safe at rest, God is nigh.

He'd keep repeating those words until all six of us were out. On those occasions, he was a good shepherd.

Now, let's shift gears. After Jesus said of himself, "I am the Light of the world," he turned to the disciples and projected that identity onto them, "You are the light of the world!" He meant each of them singularly, and he meant them collectively. You, you gathered disciples, you are a light in the world. That's a great way to describe a faithful church, as a light in the world! For me, it isn't a big stretch to hear Jesus saying, "I am the Good Shepherd," and then turning to that same raggle taggle troupe of disciples and saying, "You are to be like a Good Shepherd in the world, not like a hireling for whom 'close enough' is good enough, but like a good shepherd who doesn't rest until all the flock is accounted for.

So, I have been thinking about the church today, and whether we, collectively, are being faithful to this calling to be as a good shepherd in the world, or what it would look like if we were. There are a lot of churches out there named, Church of the Good Shepherd or Shepherd of the Hills, but I am absolutely certain there are no churches anywhere in the world named, The Church of the Hireling.

There are two characteristics that define a shepherd's mission. The first is vigilance. A good shepherd church is one that keeps an eye open for the wolves and coyotes and other predators. Nowadays, we have an eye out for sexual predators. Our Safe Church initiative incorporates this concern. One only needs to read the daily newspaper to know they are out there on the prowl.

The root word of vigilant is vigil. Vigil means 'the act of keeping awake at times when sleep is customary.' The good shepherd church sees the wolves and the coyotes when others have closed their eyes to the danger.

The other night in Confirmation class, we were naming the darkness and the danger that persist in our culture. When one student named racism, he was being the good shepherd; he was naming the lurking predator as he sees it. The good shepherd then moves to make it clear that racism is not tolerated in this pasture! The good shepherd tacks up signs on the fence posts, 'racism free zone.'

One of the books that changed my life was Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin. From the very first page, this writer awakened in me a passion for wiping out racism in my culture and in my country, but also racism within myself. Harriet Beecher Stowe is a good shepherd in our midst. The sister of Congregational preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, she stayed awake while others chose to close their eyes to the evil of slavery and to other issues of racial prejudice. A good shepherd church is a vigilant church, awake to the evils we deplore. Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote about that in 1930 in his great hymn, "God of Grace, and God of Glory." The fifth verse sings:

Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore;
Let the search for your salvation be our glory evermore.

The second characteristic I see in the quintessential shepherd is attention to wounds. I have this mental image of a shepherd holding a sheep and examining every inch for ticks or scratches or swollen glands or worms or pinkeye or hoof rot or scours or white muscle disease or ovine pneumonia or caseous lymphadenitis! No wound goes undetected from the good shepherd's eye.

The good shepherd church is like that! Soul wounds don't go untended. Wounds to the body are noticed. When the psyche is wounded, the good shepherd church is not oblivious or fast asleep under the haystack. It's hard to get through a twenty four hour day without being wounded. Somebody lays a little sarcasm on you. Somebody criticizes your hair style.

Somebody ignores you. Somebody treats you as untrustworthy. Somebody gives you a parking ticket. Somebody doesn't laugh at your joke. Somebody doesn't return your phone call. Somebody sends you a Dear John letter. It's hard to get through a day without suffering some kind of a wound. Now, I did write this paragraph upon returning from a dentist appointment which required four injections of nova cane to deaden the nerves surrounding tooth number thirty two. Perhaps that visit informed my thinking! It certainly contributed to a temporary state of woundedness!

The good shepherd church is that community where our wounds are honored, where we can count on somebody offering oil for anointing, bandages for binding, time for listening, compassion for hearing, Kleenex for weeping, therapy for crisis, and prayer for everything else! The good shepherd church is like the M*A*S*H* 4077, the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital. Like Hawkeye Pearce and Hot Lips Hoolihan, the good shepherd church is in the field, in the trenches, in those places where life is raw and bleeding and infected, ministering to the wounded of this world with uncanny, unorthodox, unprecedented love.

Unlike the hireling who, like the priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, sees the wounded one but passes right on by for fear of contaminating himself with the wounded traveler's blood; unlike that hireling, the Good Shepherd moves right in, scoops up the one in pain, and pours the precious oil wherever it is needed. The good shepherd church is the community that pays attention to wounds of all kinds.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." Not a bad name for a church, The Church of the Good Shepherd! By the grace of God, may we live into this way of being church. In the greatest of hope, Amen!

