

April 26, 2015

John 10:11-18

“Backwards Love”

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd. Amen.

Nothing I just said shocks you, does it? “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd”? Scripture calls God Father in so many different places. Jesus talks about returning to his Father in heaven, and his Father blessing him, and the Father showing love to his people.

Then there is the Lord Jesus Christ, called Lord by his disciples, even the demons, and by himself. And we call him our Good Shepherd. Jesus’ description of himself causes us to think of God as our Shepherd, ranging from Psalm 23 (The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want...) to Revelation, which describes the Last Day and Jesus sitting on his throne acting as shepherd leading his people to living water.

So nothing we have said so far is controversial at all. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, loves us and watches over us, his sheep. But it’s the way he does it that is so backwards.

There is a story that’s been repeated fairly often where one sheep walked off a cliff about five or six stories high, and the other 1500 sheep in the flock follow this leader one after the other, plunging to death or serious injury. It’s been used to classify sheep as unintelligent.

But while sheep may not be the most intelligent in a situation like that and are close to helpless, they are actually smarter than many people give them credit for. Stories like the one I just told give evidence that they follow a leader, many times to a fault. They actually do that very well when they have someone there – when they have a shepherd watching over them. They follow the shepherd and trust that shepherd implicitly.

And so really, it’s up to the shepherd to keep the sheep safe. If we look at the shepherds of Jesus’ day, they were never not with the sheep. There always had to be someone there to protect those sheep from attackers.

Jesus contrasts the shepherd that always defends the sheep to someone the shepherd hired – someone who doesn’t really care for the sheep – certainly not enough to defend them with his life.

The application that Jesus is making is pretty clear now, right? By saying he is **“the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”** Jesus speaks these words about six months before he suffered and died for us. He’s saying that any shepherd worth his salt is willing to put himself between his sheep and any wolves that would be attacking. And not only is Jesus willing to put himself between his sheep and the attacking wolves, he is willing to die so that the sheep may live.

Talk about a backwards way of doing things. That sounds so strange to us that a person is willing to sacrifice himself for an animal. Pet owners, you love your pets. And you would do a lot for them. Not many people are going to go to certain death, however, in order to defend their pets. In Jesus’ times the stakes were even higher. These sheep were the livelihood of the shepherds. But even so, it is one thing to watch the sheep and another to go to certain death for them.

Jesus says in verse 12, **“The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.”** The hired worker is not going to care about the well-being of the sheep other than to know that if he makes sure they are ok, he will get paid. That’s typically not going to motivate someone to give up their life.

Jesus is speaking at a time when these “hired hands” were all too common in people’s spiritual lives. As we said, hired hands are in it for the money...in it for themselves. That sounds

a lot like the Pharisees at the time, right? In Matthew's gospel account, Jesus describes the Pharisees as travelling over land and sea to win someone, but when they get them he says they are **"twice as much a son of hell as [the Pharisees] are."**

Can we relate to that today? Are there people out there who are "hired hands"? Are there present day Pharisees who will go to extreme lengths – who will figuratively and literally travel over land and sea to win converts? But then, when they gain those converts they lead the astray from the one true shepherd whom they claim to be serving in the first place.

That is not what a good shepherd would do. A good shepherd raises the sheep, gathers them together, leads them, and defends them. That is the ideal shepherd. That is the Good Shepherd. That is Jesus. Is there any more appropriate illustration during the Easter Season than the Good Shepherd who lays down his life – who sacrifices himself for the sheep?

As sheep, we are as good as helpless. There are stories of sheep jumping off small cliffs to get grass at the bottom. They survive the jumps, but once they are down there they have no way of getting back. They're stuck. So the shepherd will wait patiently – for days even – for the sheep to eat the grass at the bottom until the sheep tires itself out and he can hoist it back up the side of the cliff.

Fellow believers, we were once at the bottom of that cliff, looking up to the impossibly high cliff, with all our sin separating us from God. Even now, there are those out there are those out there in that same situation. Jesus speaks of them, too: **"I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."**

The Good Shepherd did lay down his life for the sheep. He died. And beyond just being a good shepherd, he is *the* Good Shepherd who rose again, in order to bring us up from the pit. He has promised that as the Good Shepherd he will watch over us and defend us. That promise goes back to all those other references of our Good Shepherd. He leads us to streams of living water, found in his Word, and found in the sacraments.

And he demonstrates his love for us in his Word. And it sounds backwards to us. He loves his Son – he loves Jesus. And yet it would seem that he loves us even more, willing to sacrifice his Son for the sake of the sheep. And having been made his through faith – having been brought into his pen, we know his voice, and we follow.

Pet owners again will be able to understand this. Dogs and pets know who their owners are. Parents will understand, too. Babies know their parents' voices. In the same way, we know the voice that called us – the voice of the gospel, the voice of our Savior who chose us before the creation of the world. In his love for us, he died so that we may recognize this voice. And we follow this voice here on earth, because as sheep that is what we are created to do.

Remember we talked about sheep being smarter than people think? That's because they do one thing well. They follow a leader and trust that leader implicitly. While we are helpless to defend ourselves, we trust our Good Shepherd and follow him implicitly because we have been made his own. Jesus has chosen us, and he has called us in his flock – to be in this one flock and follow the voice of the one Good shepherd. There is no other flock but his, and no other Good Shepherd but him, who demonstrated his love for us by laying down his life for us, and cementing us as his own by rising again.

That is the voice we follow – the voice of the one who loves us and will not leave us to wander. He lay down his life to bring us into his flock. He rose from death so that we, too, will rise. Amen.

And may the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard and keep your hearts and minds in the true faith in the Good Shepherd until we see him face to face in heaven. Amen.