

Sermon April 21 & 22 2018

Welcome to a Sunday that is OURS. Welcome to Good Shepherd Sunday! This is our day, the Church of the Good Shepherd's namesake day. We are named after Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd and it's a good name for us, because we know that our primary mission is to be Good Shepherds.

Jesus gave himself the title of the Good Shepherd and that actually was one of the most practical ways he could describe himself. Everybody in Jesus' time knew who shepherds were. Everybody knew what they did. And shepherds still do much same job as they did over 2000 years ago. They have been doing it for over 5000 years!

It's a lonely job, caring for sheep. In Jesus' time especially it involved constantly watching out for predators and thieves, keeping the sheep safe. It involved keeping track of wandering sheep, making sure that the whole herd was fed and watered and none were being neglected, especially the young – caring *constantly* for them all. And if the sheep belonged to the shepherd, he had to be willing to risk his life for them. They were his life.

But why did Jesus decide to identify himself as a lowly shepherd? Well first, he wasn't claiming to be some sort of king or leader of a political group. He was claiming to be an ordinary working man, like the carpenter he was, a man of the working class, a man like the people he was talking to.

Then, once he referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, that implied that it was possible for there to be a *bad* shepherd. And indeed, he referred to the hired hand, the one who didn't own the sheep, who didn't have a vested interest in caring for the sheep, who turned out to be a bad shepherd. Then Jesus out and out committed to them. "I know my own and my own know me." He pledged himself to them. He said he was willing to sacrifice himself for them. What was it like for these conquered people, people who had so little, people who felt trampled by world events, by Rome, what was it like for them to hear that? All of their other leaders didn't care, the priests and King Herod, who claimed to be so much better than them. They really couldn't be trusted.

But not Jesus. Jesus told them who he was, the Son of the Father, God. He told them that he knows God and God knows him. But that didn't mean distance from them. It meant he was willing to die for them.

And then as he talked to them, he looked into the future. I'm sure he confused them, but in many ways he was talking to us today. He could see the future of what he had started, the future of the church. I daresay he could see right up to us today. He told them: "What I have started here will go beyond this time and place. What I have started here will go around the world. There will be many more sheep. There will be many more sheepfolds. My flock will become far larger. And I care for all of them. I care for all of you. I will gather all of you and you will all hear my voice. You will all be one flock with one shepherd. And I will lay down my life for you. I will lay down my life so that I can take it up again. I will lay it down by my own choice – because I want to. I have the power to lay my life down and I have the power to take it up again – to rise from the dead. (I'll bet *that* took them by surprise!) This is what my Father wants me to do, and I want to do it. So I will." So he did.

There was little danger of him being considered a stooge for the Romans like Herod or any of the Temple leaders. Then he gathered other working class, ordinary people around himself to be his disciples.

And it was those disciples, the very ones who ran and scattered before the crucifixion, it was those same disciples who later, after the Resurrection, faced the High Priest Annas and his priestly court, full of confidence, and called them out: "You rejected him – the only one who could offer you salvation and you crucified him."

*This* time there was no retaliation, there was no crucifixion. This time there was no fear. No. This time, Annas the High Priest, could not condemn. He had nothing to say. He couldn't attack the disciples in front of the people. They had healed a man! Somehow, with the assurance of God's love, of Jesus' presence always with them, Jesus' disciples, the Good Shepherd's flock, found strength. And they never looked back.

We can hear it in First John, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

And this is the "love in truth and action" that happened to the Church, that the Church followed. Consider what happened to those people who were shattered and broken by the Cross and the sealed Tomb. From a small group of men and women, probably no more than 50 or 60 in number, who started out hiding in Jerusalem in the year 33, their numbers grew to include Apostles like Paul. Bart Ehrman, in *The Triumph of Christianity* tells us that less than 300 years after the crucifixion, Christianity reached "7 to 10 percent

of the population of the Roman Empire.” A mere hundred years after that, by the year 475, 30 million people, half the empire, claimed Christianity. No internet, no radio, no TV, no cars, no planes – just “love in truth and action.” With a lot of walking and riding in rowboats!

That is our legacy. That is our mission. That is who we are called to be. That is what we are called to do. We are called to continue the mission of the Good Shepherd. We are called to be Good Shepherds who “Love in truth and action.”